MIDNIGHT IN THE CENTURY

VICTOR SERGE

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
RICHARD GREEMAN

VICTOR SERGE (1890–1947) was born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich to Russian anti-tsarist exiles, impoverished intellectuals living "by chance" in Brussels. A precocious anarchist firebrand, young Victor was sentenced to five years in a French penitentiary in 1912. Expelled to Spain in 1917, he participated in an anarcho-syndicalist uprising before leaving to join the Revolution in Russia. Detained for more than a year in a French concentration camp, Serge arrived in St. Petersburg early in 1919 and joined the Bolsheviks, serving in the press services of the Communist International. An outspoken critic of Stalin, Serge was expelled from the Party and briefly arrested in 1928. Henceforth an "unperson," he completed three novels (*Men in Prison, Birth of Our Power*, and *Conquered City)* and a history (*Year One of the Russian Revolution*), all published in Paris. Arrested again in Russia and deported to Central Asia in 1933, he was allowed to leave the USSR in 1936 after international protests by militants and prominent writers like André Gide and Romain Rolland. Using his insider's knowledge, Serge published a stream of impassioned, documented exposés of Stalin's Moscow show trials and machinations in Spain, which went largely unheeded. Stateless, penniless, hounded by Stalinist agents, Serge lived in precarious exile in Brussels, Paris, Vichy France, and Mexico City, where he died in 1947. His classic *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* and his great last novels, *Unforgiving Years* and *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (both available as NYRB Classics), were written "for the desk drawer" and published posthumously.

RICHARD GREEMAN has translated and written the introductions for five of Serge's novels (including *Unforgiving Years* and *Conquered City*, both available as NYRB Classics). A veteran socialist and co-founder of the Praxis Center and Victor Serge Library in Moscow, (www.praxiscenter.ru), Greeman is the author of the Web site *The Invisible International* (bit.ly/invisible-international).

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The Case of Comrade Tulayev
Conquered City
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Unforgiving Years

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INTRODUCTION

I. WRITER AND REVOLUTIONARY

Victor Serge's *Midnight in the Century* is an authentic document grounded in the author's personal experience of arrest, interrogation, and deportation by the GPU to Orenburg on the Ural from 1933 to 1936. Soon after the novel's publication in Paris in 1939, however, Serge took pains to insist that although entirely "truthful" (in political and historical terms) his novel was a work of the imagination. Indeed, as a writer who placed himself "in the line of the Russian novelists," Serge claimed for fiction a truth superior to that of history or the essay "combining internal vision with the knowledge of men and things." He insisted that "to reconstruct reality with sufficient intensity of life requires literary creation and the intuition, passion and freedom it provides."[1]

The paradox of Serge the literary artist was that he was also a committed revolutionary. Always in the thick of action, his career united the roles of propagandist, organizer, journalist, pamphleteer, lecturer, theoretician, publicist, translator, militiaman, manual worker, occasional secret agent, and frequent prisoner (for more than ten years and under at least three different regimes). Serge was both an activist and an independent critical thinker whose political involvements evolved from anarchism through syndicalism, Bolshevism, and Trotskyism to a kind of socialist humanism. The child of anti-tsarist exiles, he came of age in a tradition of socialist culture which came to flower in figures like Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin, Stalin, Radek, Andrés Nin, Emma Goldman, Georg Lukács, and Antonio Gramsci—to mention only those with whom Serge was personally acquainted.

Of all the left-wing writers who attempted, from the inside, to depict the truth of the Communist movement during the tragic decades of Stalin's ascendancy—names like Orwell, Koestler, Regler, Malraux, and Silone

come most readily to mind—Serge was perhaps the most authentic socialist, indeed the only professional revolutionary. A veteran, eventually lonely survivor, of revolutionary movements in half a dozen countries, witness-participant to several of the major victories and defeats of the revolutionary proletariat in the first half of the twentieth century, his "knowledge of men and things" was unequaled—as was his devotion to the truth.

Yet it is above all as a literary witness and ultimately as an artist that Serge will be remembered—an artist speaking directly out of a vital socialist culture whose traditions and aspirations, successes and failures he distilled and preserved in his writing. As Erich Fromm wrote to me in 1964, "I believe indeed that to rescue the humanist tradition of the last decades is of the utmost importance, and that Victor Serge is one of the outstanding personalities representing the socialist aspect of humanism."

But it was in his novels (of which seven survive) that he best succeeded in re-creating the psychological, intellectual, and physical atmosphere (and above all the human dimension) of the tragic and heroic struggles in which he was so deeply involved. Serge conceived of writing as an act of witness, "as a means of expressing for people what most of them live without being able to express, as a means of communion, as a testimony about the vast life that flows through us whose essential aspects we must try to fix for the benefit of those who will come after us." The values that inform his work are those of sincerity, solidarity, and truthfulness.

Paradoxically, Serge turned to literature at the very moment when Russian writers were being forced to deny these values. By 1930, the freedom and creative ferment of the Soviet literary renaissance of the 1920s, in which Serge had taken part as a critic and translator, had been crushed by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Serge, however, although a Soviet citizen, wrote in French and published mainly in Paris. This circumstance allowed him to continue the literary experiments of his Russian friends and colleagues—Babel, Esenin, Gladkov, Mandelstam, Mayakovsky, and Pilniak, among others—whose voices were silenced by censorship, suicide, and deportation. His work thus represents a unique strand of continuity in Russian writing between the creative flowering of the 1920s and the post-

Thaw dissidence in that it escapes the straightjacket of Stalinist socialist realism.

Serge is also unique in other ways: Although a committed Marxist with a long experience of the workers' movement, he was also a literary modernist who was unafraid to borrow from "decadent" influences like Freud and Joyce. Moreover, Serge was at one and the same time a "proletarian" writer, who lived in poverty and worked with his hands (he was a printer by trade) throughout much of his life, and a mature, fully fledged literary artist. A born novelist, a man of universal culture who had long been aware of his literary vocation and had developed his craft through a long apprenticeship as a journalist, literary critic, translator, and publicist, Serge revealed himself as a writer of extraordinary power with his first novel, *Men in Prison* (1929).

It was his ambition to break the mold of the traditional novel in order to go beyond the limits of the individual self and reach out to that "vast life that flows through us." He was thus led to abandon the singular "I" for the collective "we" and to replace the individual protagonist with a kind of collective hero. Borrowing techniques from Pilniak, Dos Passos, and the French Unanimists, he created a rapid, fluid style incorporating vernacular elements of slang, documentary journalism, and cinematographic realism. At the same time, the density of his writing, with its simultaneous presentation of external detail and interior monologue, tends to blur the boundaries between past and present, inner and outer life, permitting occasional flights of what can best be described as a cosmic lyricism.

Serge's first three novels, *Men in Prison, Birth of Our Power*, and *Conquered City*, were written in Leningrad, where he was living in "semi-captivity," and published in Paris between 1929 and 1932. They comprise an informal trilogy chronicling the birth pangs of the revolution. Shortly after the publication of *Conquered City*, Serge was arrested and interrogated for months in the notorious Lubyanka GPU prison. As he steadfastly refused to confess and there was no evidence against him, he was administratively deported to Orenburg on the Ural River, where because of his unbending attitude of opposition, he was denied work and nearly starved to death.

Although a captive in Orenburg, Serge was free to write, and ironically he survived on the postal insurance payments he received for manuscripts sent to Paris that were mysteriously "lost" in the mail. He nonetheless completed two more novels of his cycle. *The Lost Men* depicted the tragedy of the 1911 anarchist bandits of Paris and would have preceded *Men in Prison* in the series. *The Whirlwind*, set in 1920, followed on *Conquered City* and was "devoted to the year of the Russian revolution which was richest in hope and perhaps the greatest in energy deployed." Both were confiscated by the GPU and have not been recovered. As Serge wrote in 1940: "They have shot all the men who made the greatness of those times: it is natural that they should kill the works in which that greatness was reflected."

In Orenburg, during the years before Stalin's world-shaking blood purges of the Old Bolsheviks, Serge was thrown in with a group of exiled Trotskyites and revolutionary dissidents whose courageous struggle to maintain their socialist ideals in the face of Stalinist lies and persecutions later inspired what is perhaps Serge's most poignant and moving novel, *Midnight in the Century*, to which we will turn in a moment. In 1936, after an international campaign in his favor, Serge was expelled from Russia (like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn some thirty years later).

From 1936 to 1940, he lived a precarious existence in Brussels and Paris, working in print shops and campaigning against the Stalinist persecution of revolutionary minorities in Russia and Spain. During this brief period of relative security (and despite severe material hardships, including a Communist campaign of slander that effectively closed the major media to him), Serge produced poetry, journalism, political essays, and fiction in profusion. He collaborated with Leon Trotsky (whose *Revolution Betrayed* he translated into French) and analyzed the Russian experience in three book-length essays (*From Lenin to Stalin, Destiny of a Revolution*, and *Portrait of Stalin*), which anticipate *The Gulag Archipelago* by their compelling fusion of authentic documentation, personal testimony, and historical irony, but which differ from Solzhenitsyn's later novels in their consistent commitment to the ideals of socialism and freedom.

In 1938, having fulfilled his political duty by exposing Stalin's betrayal of socialism in these nonfiction works, Serge felt free to return to fiction in

order to re-create the full human dimension of this experience in *Midnight in the Century*, which was published by Grasset in Paris in 1939 and mentioned for that year's Prix Goncourt. However, the onset of the Second World War soon destroyed Serge's precarious hold on literary success along with his even more precarious Parisian exile. His books were suppressed and their author forced to flee to Marseilles and thence, after an excruciating "battle for visas," to Mexico, where he died in 1947 in poverty and obscurity with three unpublished books in his desk drawer: among them his classic *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* and two novels, *Unforgiving Years* and *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*.

II. *MIDNIGHT IN THE CENTURY*

The theme of the persistence of the socialist ideal runs like a red thread through all of Serge's works, but nowhere is it more evident than in the novel that chronicles the eclipse of that ideal—*Midnight in the Century*. It is a novel about one of history's darkest hours, the hour of Hitler's triumph in Germany and Stalin's apotheosis in Russia. It is a book about men and women in defeat, about Russian Communists whose fidelity to the liberating revolution of 1917 has landed them in the Gulag of 1934, and who must now ask themselves the question: "What is to be done if it is midnight in the century?"

It is also a book radiant with admiration of the courage, political integrity, and humanity of its Communist heroes, glowing with intellectual passion as it grapples with the essential questions of socialism, history, and human destiny at a time when thought itself is "glacial . . . something of a midnight sun piercing the skull." Radiant, too, in its revolutionary faith in an unknown future dimly viewed across an abyss of foreseeable cataclysms, a future symbolized by the image of seeds germinating in the earth. Responding in 1940 to criticism that his novel was "too dark," Serge declared: "I did not wish it so. I wanted only to be truthful, I even made efforts to include all the muted, secret, tenacious light that I have never

ceased to see among the men of the Russian soil. I would have liked to end it on a note of hope, and I believe it is there."

It is an authentic book that records—and transfigures—Serge's ordeal of eighty days of solitary confinement and interrogation in the GPU prison in Moscow, his resistance during two years of deportation in Central Asia, and his unending opposition to the Stalinist betrayal of the revolutionary movement to which he had dedicated his life. Serge devoted a chapter of his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* to his "Years of Captivity: 1933–1936," and there left indelible portraits of his comrades among the deportees in Orenburg, revolutionary heroes and irreducible opponents of Stalinism like Fanya Upstein, Lisa Senatskaya, Vassily Pankratov, and Boris Eltsin, among whom it is possible to identify "models" for some of the protagonists of *Midnight in the Century*.[2] However, in the 1940 article cited above, Serge insists that "*Midnight in the Century*, because it is a novel, is a much truer more profound testimony than would be Memoirs, in which the author would only relate what he himself had lived." He adds: "It is a mistake to try to recognize the author in his characters. Why would he create them if it were not to escape from himself, to break the rather stifling circle of the self, break with involuntary egocentrism, penetrate another being, incorporate oneself within him, and by a sort of communion attain a more general truth about man?"

Finally, it is an important book politically, for the main issue that Serge deals with—socialism versus barbarism—is more than ever fundamental to humankind's survival. Serge's genius lies in his ability to dramatize with clarity the problems that have been besetting revolutionaries for over two hundred years in a style that is moving and poetic. Through the anguish of his heroes, we are led to rethink the dilemma of the world's first successful socialist revolution in the throes of transformation into its own opposite—from the activity of millions struggling to create a new world in the image of justice into a narrow, exploitative tyranny—and to pose the question anew for our own age. Serge's development of the motifs of life's renewal, of the passage of seasons and generations, and of the transmission of messages among the imprisoned, isolated, and persecuted revolutionaries raises his theme, the persistence of the socialist ideal, to the level of poetic vision. It is

a vision that extends backward in time to connect with earlier traditions of revolt and dissidence while prefiguring, in the most explicit fashion, the struggles of Russian and East European socialist rebels that rose to the surface again during the years of glasnost. Indeed, Serge was one of the first Soviet dissidents to be eagerly rediscovered by the "new left" generation of Russian anti-totalitarian socialists during the 1980s and '90s.[3]

During his years of deportation in Orenburg, Serge was keenly aware of belonging to a long tradition of persecuted Russian dissidents:

> By one of those strokes of irony that are so frequent in Russia [he later recalled], the Soviet Press was, quite appropriately, commemorating an anniversary of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko, who in 1847 had been exiled for ten years to the steppes of Orenburg, "forbidden to draw or to write." He did, all the same, write some clandestine poetry that he concealed in his boots. In this report I had an overwhelming insight into the persistence in our Russian land, after a century of reform, progress, and revolution, of the same willful determination to wipe out the rebellious intelligence without mercy. Never mind, I told myself, I must hold on: hold on and work on, even under this slab of lead.[4]

The theme of eternal heresy and eternal persecution is omnipresent in *Midnight in the Century*. It broods over Chernoe (Black-Waters), Serge's fictional town on the steppe, which has hosted generations of exiles, refugees, sectarians, and heretics. The town, we are told, was founded by the semilegendary patriarch Seraphim Lack-Land, a seventeenth-century religious schismatic who led his people into the wilderness to escape the unholy power of the centralizing Orthodox hierarchy only to be dragged back to Moscow and a martyr's fate. The image of the righteous, unrepentant old man chained in his dungeon, repeating, "Lord, I will never deny thee, I will never deny thy people," reverberates through the entire novel.

Next in Serge's line of apostolic succession is Lebedkin, the political deportee from Petersburg. Exiled under the tsarist regime, he welcomes the

cleansing hurricane of the 1917 revolution in Chernoe—one thousand miles from the capital—and contemplates his lonely fate on the same hilltop where Seraphim had earlier meditated his martyrdom. Seventeen years pass and Chernoe is again populated by deportees, martyrs, and schismatics. Although the foreground of Serge's novel is occupied by the Left Oppositionists, the heretics of the new Stalinist orthodoxy, the background is crowded with persecuted schismatics—religious sectarians, Old Believers, Zionists—who are also suffering for their faith. In the novel's climactic scene, Rodion's break from jail, there is a translucent moment of silent communion between the young Trotskyite and an Old Believer, which epitomizes the theme of eternal heresy and eternal persecution in the tortured Russian land. This epiphany, for which Serge has carefully and lovingly prepared, takes place under streaming stars in a mystical atmosphere of biblical simplicity. It is a Marxist materialist's homage to spirituality.

Nature, too, is intimately related to Serge's theme of suffering and resistance. Although primarily a man of cities—Paris, Barcelona, Moscow, and Petrograd were his places of predilection and the setting of much of his fiction—Serge had a deep awareness of man's place in the natural order. For him, the dialectic of human history is an outgrowth of the dialectic of nature, and in *Midnight in the Century* the rhythms of nature are at once the physical setting and the consistent metaphor against which the action develops.

The Chernoe section of the novel opens with a heartrendingly bittersweet evocation of the return of spring to the frozen steppe. The breakup of the ice on the river, greeted with joy by the villagers after the long, barren winter, is emblematic of the renewal of human hopes. The exiled Trotskyites are also touched by the spectacle. Their clandestine meeting on the riverbank becomes the occasion for a lyrical celebration of the northern spring on the part of the granite-faced Old Bolshevik, Ryzhik, and even the sarcasms of the cynical Elkin fail to dampen his ardor:

> "Ryzhik, you missed your calling. You should be turning out octosyllables at three roubles a line. Why did you have to get mixed up

in the Revolution? Today, you would be an official of the Pastoral Poets' Division of the Union of Soviet Writers. You would be inundating the gazettes with organized, ideologically correct, and profitable lyricism. Pushkin would turn green with envy on his pedestal."

"Go to Hell. I would never have seen the amazing flowers of the North. And you see, nothing in the world would make me want to cross them out of my life."

The joy of nature's renewal is more deeply undercut by the irony of the political situation: "Spring . . . means sowing-time. Sowing time means repression." The logic of events demands that in order to squeeze a grain surplus out of the sullenly resisting, newly collectivized peasantry, Stalin will take a new political tack, necessitating a new purge. The political exiles understand this process as a sign of the weakness of the regime. They have predicted it. The villagers, equally prescient in their resignation, accept it as one more seasonal cataclysm to be endured. Yet such is the power of nature's spectacle of death and rebirth that neither group can resist the temptation to embrace life and hope. Life is struggle. Life goes on.

The central action of the novel unfolds in this brief moment between the breakup of the winter ice and the onset of the political freeze that will deprive Serge's heroes of the semi-freedom of deportation and send them back to prison. During this interval there is time to take stock of their lives, to choose how they will resist the inevitable, to exchange significant messages, to fall in love, and to pass the living flame of revolution from one generation to the next. Thus the seasonal pattern of death and rebirth, destruction and continuity is intimately related to the theme of the generations, of the human forces who will carry on the struggle against oppression from one generation to the next.

Serge the Marxist believed that the Russian Revolution was not dead but only sleeping. He felt that as industry developed and Russia emerged from backwardness, the socialized system of production would inevitably come into contradiction with the oppressive system of bureaucratic privilege and control. A new proletariat, self-confident and schooled in this new industry,

would then pick up the struggle where the vanquished vanguard of the 1920s and '30s had gone down in defeat. This, however, might take generations (especially if war intervened, which it did) and until then the germ of revolutionary thought would be kept alive by minorities. Serge found a metaphoric expression for this vision in the related natural images of the spring thaw and of seeds germinating beneath the soil and in the traditional Russian theme of "fathers" and "sons." A concrete, historically grounded political perspective thus develops as a structuring element in the novel.

The final section of *Midnight*, significantly entitled "The Beginning," focuses on the character of the youngest of the political exiles, Rodion, a semi-educated, semi-alcoholic worker whose brain is befuddled by half-understood quotes from Hegel and whose spirit is obsessed with the problem of fate. As for so many before him, jail and exile have been the "universities" in which the revolutionary traditions of the "fathers" have been passed down to this rather unpromising "son." It is Rodion who represents the new generation that will carry on the revolutionary idea and assure the continuity between the great but doomed generation of Old Bolsheviks and the unknown future.

Yet, to do this, he must break with a central element in that tradition: the idea of the Party as the incarnation of the proletarian vanguard. He alone dares to break the tie of Party unity that binds the older Trotskyite dissidents to their Stalinist persecutors, their refusal to appeal to the masses outside the Party, to even imagine creating a "second party." "Listen to me," he tells the comrades: "It's no longer true: something has been lost forever. Lenin will never rise again in his mausoleum. Our only brothers are the working people who no longer have either rights or bread. They're the ones we must talk to. It is with them that we must remake the Revolution and first of all a completely different Party . . ."

As he wanders the night streets of Chernoe, troubled and alone, his intuition becomes a certainty. The sight of GPU headquarters, lights blazing into the night, inspires him with a vision of that new revolution as an inevitable spring tide: "Work! Work night and day, you'll still be swept away . . . The ice breaks up after the long winter, the spring floods sweep it

away . . . It will be beautiful when they overflow . . . Your files, your papers, all your dirty little typewritten verdicts, and your prisons, all of them, the old wooden barracks, sealed with barbed wire, the modern American-style concrete buildings, all of that will be blown sky high . . ."

Rodion's escape into the starry night across the silent forest and the icy river is a symbolic flight into nature as well as a return to life, to the common destiny of the masses, who are part of nature and part of history. If Stalinist totalitarianism represents the negation of the revolution, then the masses represent what Hegel called "the negation of the negation." Rodion, the least educated of the novel's heroes, is also the most philosophical:

> "History," said Hegel . . . "History is something we make, we are historical, too, like all the poor devils . . ." There is no certainty that this machine will stop and crumble one day all by itself. It must be destroyed. Another revolution. We will make one, and in a very different way. I don't know how, but it will be very different. But first, escape from them . . .

Rodion's experiences in the forest are spiritual as well as physical trials, rites of passage that include a symbolic death by drowning and a rebirth. He is rescued by a nameless, solitary wolf hunter who represents the temptation of a life of self-sufficiency in nature but outside of society. This Rodion also rejects. Purified and tested, nameless now like the wolf man and the natural objects that surround him, he enters a nameless town and rejoins the ranks of the proletariat from which he had sprung. Rodion's escape is, I assume, the muted "note of hope" with which Serge wanted to end his novel.

Significantly, the edifice on which he gets a job as a construction worker is the new headquarters for the secret police, the only concrete building in a desert of mud and wood. It is Serge's ironic symbol for the paradox of "socialist construction" under the Stalinist system where the labor of the proletariat can only serve to increase the power of those who oppress it—until such time as the proletariat is ready once again to take destiny into its

own hands. Until then, Serge seems to be saying, Rodion's revolutionary vision will persist like "seeds germinating in the womb" of the Russian soil ready to bear fruit at the next thaw.

III. MESSAGES

History does not move in straight lines. It moves in waves. Those waves are revolutions. Serge's Communist heroes in *Midnight in the Century* have ridden on the crest of the great revolutionary wave of 1917 to 1923—a height from which they have caught a glimpse of what might be, of humanity's power to reshape society in its own image. Now, with Hitler and Stalin in the ascendant, they are in the trough, about to be engulfed in the sea of counter-revolutionary reaction. Yet through the wreckage of their lives and hopes they affirm the vision of what they have seen from the crest, the dangerous secret whose exposure their captors fear most—mankind can be free: What happened once can happen again. Others will succeed where we have failed. The next wave (or the one after that) will reach the shore. As Serge puts it in *Birth of Our Power*, "Nothing is ever lost."

This continuity is the central political message of Serge's novel for today's readers. Like a shipwrecked explorer who places the log of his voyage in a bottle and consigns it to the waves, Serge epitomized the experience of a whole revolutionary generation in the form of a novel and set it afloat on the troubled seas of history. By 1939 his Russian comrades, the models for the heroes of *Midnight in the Century*, had all perished and, like Melville's shipwrecked Ishmael, Serge might well have said with Job's messenger, "I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

Messages are an important theme in the novel. Indeed, its key chapter is entitled "Messages." In its most dramatic scene, Varvara furiously tears apart a beautifully bound book she has received in the mail and removes from its binding sheets of ultrathin paper containing the "theses" of her Oppositionist comrades in the prison of Verkneuralsk concerning the "state-capitalist" nature of the Stalinist regime, which Trotsky still

considered a "deformed workers state." Serge was referring here to an authentic document, which was discovered and analyzed by the Moscow historian Alexei Gusev when the GPU archives were opened to scholars in the 1990s. Another "message," this one from the exiled Trotsky, reaches the deportees by an even more circuitous route. An apolitical technocratic Soviet economist on a mission to Paris comes across a copy of *The Bulletin of the Left Opposition* and reads it before carefully tearing it up and flushing it down the toilet. Arrested later in a purge of economists, he passes Trotsky's ideas on to the Oppositionists in the prison who pass it on to the deportee in Chernoe. These messages—the "mail" in prison jargon—are the ideas that nourish the novel's heroes with information, ideas, and hope, reminding them that they are not alone.

Nor is it merely a poetical conceit on my part to present Serge's novel as a kind of message. Serge himself, dedicating the book to his comrades in Spain, speaks of it as "messages from their brothers in Russia." Like the messages transmitted from prison to prison within the novel, the book is first of all a kind of report, a balance sheet, an insider's description of the economic and political situation and a firsthand account of the physical, moral, and intellectual health of the surviving Russian Opposition—including its hesitations and internal factional divisions. "The truth of men and things." It is also the message to the world from the comrades Serge left behind in Russia. For Serge, "he who speaks, he who writes is essentially someone speaking for all those who are voiceless," the persecuted, the oppressed, the gagged, the fallen. Serge was literally haunted by the memory of the fallen, of the dead comrades behind him, and his fiction was both the acquittal of a debt and an attempt to give them a kind of immortality.

It is these comrades, the dead and the living, who form the collective hero of Serge's novel cycle. They are the "men" of *Men in Prison*, the "we" of *Birth of Our Power*, the defenders of besieged Civil War Petrograd in *Conquered City*, the defeated yet defiant Oppositionists of *Midnight in the Century*. Together they form a kind of "invisible international" whose messages of solidarity cross the barriers of guarded frontiers and prison walls, the barriers of blood, lies, and slanders, and the barriers of time as

well. These messages represent the accumulated experience, wisdom, and sacrifice of millions, distilled into truthful fiction through the alchemy of literary creation. They are a precious heritage for those who choose to receive them.

Today, seventy-five years after these messages were set down by the hand of a unique survivor who was also an incomparable novelist, the bottle containing them has washed up on our shores. They illuminate a past which is the origin of our present and tell us that the future may yet be a new beginning.

—Richard Greeman
October 2014

[1] On January 30, 1940, Serge devoted one of his weekly columns in *La Wallonie*, the independent, union-sponsored daily paper in Liège, Belgium, to answering questions about *Midnight*, his recently published novel. A collection of two hundred of Serge's weekly columns has recently been published in France under the misleading title *Retour à l'Ouest* (Marseille: Agone, 2010). It is a brilliant introduction to European and world politics from the triumph of the Popular Front (June 1936) to the fall of France (June 1940) and should be published in English.

[2] Serge's son, Vlady, who as a teenager shared his father's exile and knew "the comrades" well, has also recorded his memories. See Claudio Albertani, *Los Camaradas Eternas*. Remarkably, Lisa Senatskaya, one of the Left Opposition deportees who shared Serge and Vlady's years in Orenburg, survived, remained true to her convictions, and was reunited with Vlady in 1990. Serge's sister-in-law and co-accused, Anita Russakova, also survived the camps. When I visited her in her Leningrad apartment in 1991, a Russian review with Trotsky's picture on the cover (probably the first to be published in sixty years) was lying on her coffee table.

[3] Since 1997, the Praxis Research and Education Center in Moscow (www.praxiscenter.ru) has been publishing Julia Guseva's Russian

translations of Serge's novels and memoirs along with other formerly forbidden classics of anarchism and antitotalitarian socialism. Praxis, of which I am a co-founder, maintains the Victor Serge Library in Moscow, with more than eight thousand works in various languages, holds annual international conferences, and is active on the democratic left in Russia and Ukraine.

[4] Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, translated by Peter Sedgwick with George Paizis (New York: New York Review Books, 2012).

MIDNIGHT IN THE CENTURY

To the memory of

Kurt Landau, Andrés Nin, Erwin Wolf,
who disappeared in Barcelona and
whose very death was stolen from us,

to Joaquin Maurin, *in a Spanish prison*,

to Juan Andrade, Julian Gorkin, Katia Landau, Olga Nin *and through them to all those whose valour they incarnate,*

I dedicate these messages from their
brothers in Russia.

ВСЯ ВЛАСТЬ СОВѢТАМ

I. CHAOS

Mikhail Ivanovich Kostrov, who was not at all superstitious, had a feeling that things were about to happen in his life. They were heralded by almost imperceptible signs. So it was for his arrest. There had been the peculiar tone of voice with which the Rector had told him: "Mikhail Ivanovich, I've decided to suspend your course for the moment . . . You're up to the Directory, * aren't you?" Fear, obviously, of allusions to the new political turn. "So," the Rector continued, "prepare me a very short course on Greece." A shift of about two thousand years. Here, Kostrov felt he was making a mistake, but he made it joyfully, for the sheer pleasure of alarming this comfortably-established pussy-footer who put on a special voice whenever he telephoned the Committee Secretary.

"An excellent idea," Kostrov replied. "I've had a lecture-series on the class struggle in the ancient city-state in my mind for a long time . . . There's room for a whole new theory of tyranny." The Rector avoided Kostrov's eyes by keeping his head lowered over his papers. The bald-spot on the top of his skull made him look tonsured. "All the same, not too many new theories," he muttered through his thick lips. "Goodbye." It was when he noticed that tonsure that Mikhail Ivanovich sensed that things were going to happen.

He left there with a sharp suspicion: "Someone has informed on me: Who?" Then his memory recovered the image of a dumpy, inelegant little woman with a rather large bust draped in an army-supply-store trenchcoat. A narrow forehead, a long mouth, cold eyes—something rodent-like in her face. He didn't like her. In her pudgy hand an activist's briefcase already stuffed, he was sure, with important papers: District Committee Theses for agitators, lists of activists, etc.—"Comrade Professor, you weren't very clear on the Left-wing Thermidorians . . . or I didn't catch your point. . . . *They were*, you said (I noted it), *bad Thermidorians, who, by supporting Barras and Tallien, prepared their own undoing* . . . I don't completely understand your

distinction between good and bad Thermidorians." "You've been spying on me, you little bitch. You're the one who denounced me."

At that instant she emerged from the Dia-Mat office (Dialectical Materialism) preceded by her briefcase and that odious soft bosom, talking loudly in her rather harsh voice, suitable for platforms constructed of unplaned planks and decorated with red gauze. She was talking, naturally, about the wall-newspaper. "That's forbidden," she said imperiously, "it's quite, quite out of the question. The Editorial Committee . . ." At the words "out of the question" Kostrov had no more doubts. Informer. He walked more rapidly to avoid having to say hello to her, but she waved to him gaily, and behind her he saw the curly head of Irina, a little Zyrianka from the Kama highlands whom he found charming with her smooth face, wide-set eyes, sharp cheekbones, and fine lips chiselled by a miniaturist of the Reindeer Age. "Well, comrade," he asked her, "your paper, is it coming along?" Yes, yes, she nodded, serious yet playful—playful only in the depths of her eyes, those tiny distant flecks of gold flashing as if from the bottom of a pool. They spoke for a moment, then a wave of students separated them, for the eleven o'clock bell was ringing.

That evening, at the supper table, across from Ganna, with Tamarochka perched on her paint-smeared highchair between them, he inquired:

"And what would you say, Ganna, if they arrested me?"

Ganna continued serving grey macaroni to the little girl. A slight flush came to her cheeks and her shell-rimmed glasses seemed slightly askew as she said simply:

"You think so?"

The little girl was listening, a watchful mouse. In our times, children have to understand. Let the children know. It's better to prepare them than lie to them endlessly. They arrested Vanil Vanilich, downstairs, two weeks ago and his Svetlana, who had been told that "Daddy went to Leningrad, you know, to the Academy of Sciences," finally complained that they were deceiving her. "I know that Daddy is in jail; I know it, I know it! And I'm sad that Daddy's in jail, but why are you all lying?" The Jew from the fourth floor was in jail. Marussia's brother-in-law, too. Seven-year-old Svetlana told six-year-old Tamarochka: "I saw a man who got shot: he used to come to

my aunt's, and he had a big nose. He was a nasty man and I'm glad they shot him."

Her grandfather scolded her: "Svetlana, it's wrong to talk like that, Svetlana, you have to think of others' sorrow." (An old dotard, this grandfather, who cautiously sympathized with the sect of the Churikovtsy.) Svetlana, pouting, persisted, looking up at him from under her big, round forehead: "And I say, Grandfather, that he's a nasty man and so they were right. They were right to shoot him." She hopped around on one foot repeating: "They were right." It was probably only to see Grandfather's eyes grow misty and his lips start to tremble, from which she concluded that he loved her and that he was weak.

Tamarochka watched these carryings-on, listened to everything. How Grandfather loves her and how she torments him! What a naughty girl you are Svetlana, she thought. And she jumped sideways, tapped Svetlana on the shoulder, and ran behind the bench to make her chase after her.

Then Grandfather contemplated the tall silhouette of a man—gaunt, severe, all vertical lines—cut in grey stone against the sky. So straight. So hard. So beautiful. The Inquisitor. Grandfather sighed. Yet it was only Timiriazev, the naturalist, for the children had gone out for some fresh air on Tverskoy Boulevard at the corner of Malaya Nikitskaya. There, in that quiet street on the right, an ordinary white church. Pushkin was married there, one hundred years ago. Pushkin.

No happiness here below, but calm and will.

Grandfather loved that line, he who had had neither calm nor will. Like Pushkin himself. Like almost everyone here below. But that line contained a harmony, an admirable lie. No: a truth from beyond. Truer than the truth, superior. Calm and will don't exist. They tower above everything, inaccessible and supreme, real and unreal. No one can understand it, no one . . . Across from the church, a little townhouse surrounded by a wrought-iron fence backed up by a wooden palisade to keep out indiscreet eyes. There lived Maxim Gorky. A man who needed nothing: neither calm nor happiness nor will! He wrote—implacably—sugary, revolting, almost

soul-less things. Perhaps he suffered, for it must be painful to feel yourself so close to death with so little soul. "I would gladly pray for you, Alexei Maximovich," thought Grandfather, "but the things you write make me lose the desire . . ."

This whole universe and much more—things vaster and more complicated—were at that moment reflected in the soul of six-year-old Tamarochka, watchful little mouse, who was gnawing something at the table, eyes wide open. Above her the man and the woman were examining the future within them.

"You think so?" repeated Ganna.

Kostrov realized that he *knew*. Prescience, premonition are words used by ignorant people, but they mean what they mean. You add up hundreds of subconscious observations and computations, and suddenly you come up with a certainty—not exactly a rational one perhaps, but perfectly valid.

"Of course."

"In the past six weeks we've had three hundred arrests in Moscow, think of it. All men of my generation, Civil War militants, members of the '26 '27 Opposition, all of whom had fallen into line in order to live in peace." Ganna was lost in thought, Ganna who looked amazingly like a studious little girl, with pink cheeks, a slightly upturned nose, and braids. Even in bed, when it was time to make love, he wanted her to keep her shell-rimmed glasses on because of the funny-serious expression they gave her childish face. Then she would turn deliciously pink. "No, let me take them off, I'm embarrassed." His male laughter shocked her, she blushed and Mikhail would repeat "I forbid it, Darling . . . Darling . . ." as he bent over her naked body. He liked her. He didn't know if he loved her, exactly. We live that way, without knowing.

"If they arrest you," she asked, "don't you think I'll lose my job at Statistics?"

Quite possible. "You can sell the sofa, and my brown suit." They laughed. That sofa, that brown suit, last resorts! They were ready. Two days later, they arrested him. Just like that, in the street, near the trolley stop. A man came up alongside him on the sidewalk, walked along with him, cut him off.

Cap, shabby overcoat, vulgar, young face. "Comrade Kostrov, please come with me."

"I know, I know," said Mikhail Ivanovich, almost relieved. The other man showed no surprise. "This way." They entered a courtyard with broken paving. Puddles of rainwater were stagnating, a car splattered with last night's mud was parked in front of a door opening into a dark hallway. From the cellars emerged a stale odour of something rotting. Kostrov stumbled into a puddle, annoyed that his trouser-cuff would be muddy, even more annoyed to catch himself thinking about something so stupid. The man opened the door. "Get in, Citizen."

The Housing Cooperative Committee requests tenants behind in their rent . . . under penalty of being written up on the blackboard. . . . Housing Cooperative No 6767, Lenin lives eternally.

Kostrov read these lines posted on the crumbling plaster. Eternally! Bunch of morons! The car jounced through the puddles, turned under the frantic clanging of a trolley-bell, shot off toward the massive, square, red-brick tower of Trinity Gate, spun past the battlements of the Kremlin, past the white colonnade of the Grand Theatre, slowed down under a huge picture of the Chief which covered the whole facade of a department store under construction, stopped short in Dzherzhinsky Square opposite a door like any other, guarded by an infantryman wearing a sort of spiked helmet made of cloth. Above this door a tarnished bronze mask was smiling nastily through its beard. "Hi, there, Marx!" Kostrov greeted him in his mind. "Is that bayonet tickling you? You're wise not to show yourself among us, or you'd be going through this door yourself, old brother, and they'd take care of you in short order." He had nothing but ideas coming and going in disorder through his wind-swept brain. But no fear: a kind of relief, the urge to make wise-cracks.

* * *

Next, he sank into the boredom of a long wait in an empty office. From there he was taken down by elevator into an ordinary compartment of chaos. From chaos, he came up to the surface of silence, calmly. And then came that stab of cardiac pain. Thus a key turns in a lock, from the other

side of the door; and a whole unknown world of desolation lies behind that door. Kostrov, satisfied with himself, would have told you: "You know, being locked up doesn't upset me. I've been through it before. For instance, in Lvov, in Poland, in '20. The police picked me up in a roundup of suspects. My friend, I was in a tight spot. If they had looked a little closer at my Czech passport, I would have been hanged at the least. Another time, in Tiflis in '21—less dangerous, of course, because the Social-Democrats were very well informed. Noah Agachvili came to see me at the Metek prison. We had known each other in Paris. 'Your uprising?' he told me. 'But my dear fellow, I'm pulling all the strings. I'm putting you out of the way, in your own interest. Say, would you care for a game of chess?' I must tell you that Agachvili never forgot the checkmate I inflicted on him in Petersburg after the July insurrection in which we had fought against each other at the corner of Millionnaya Street . . . I arrested him myself some time after Sovietization. He must be in deportation out in Uzbekistan right now. In '24, in Ruschuk, in Bulgaria, a difficult time . . . In '28, in Moscow, but then I had some good ideological arguments with the judge who interrogated me. Not without effect, since he later turned bad, or rather turned good: he's out in the Solovietski Islands, five years, Sir, for a far-left deviation.

"Here, after all, I feel at home, like part of the family. They lock us up. Politics demands it. The time for grain stockpiling is getting close. Obviously it will be a fiasco; the Planning Commission's audit figures show it clearly enough. So they're afraid of us, even though we keep our mouths shut."

Chaos was a rectangular room containing six bunks and thirty prisoners. Vapour from peoples' breath was dripping down the walls. The tobacco smoke was so thick that you moved through a suffocating cloud. It was very hot. Your flesh was damp, your head ached, you felt like vomiting. Someone was always vomiting. They pissed or shat over the chamber-pot, and newcomers, who were placed in that corner, lived in the midst of the stench and filthy carnal noises. People slept on and under the cots. In order to move, a narrow space along the back wall was reserved by mutual agreement, with everyone, seated or standing, squeezing up against his

neighbour. It was called the boulevard, and each, in his turn, had the right to take a little walk on it. In the evening, somewhere above, past several floors that were a series of closed universes, one above the next, a brass band belted out catchy dance-tunes for the 4th Special Battalion Club—fellows in uniform and blondes, brunettes, chestnuts, redheads, yes even redheads, wearing too much powder and shoulders draped in those pretty see-through shawls they sell for twenty-one roubles at the Coop of the State Political Administration (GPU).

A ghost in a goatee looming out of the mist of Chaos, told how he had resold some of those shawls: "There they are, strutting their stuff up there, the little whores, while I'm down here for six shawls! Shit, what a life!" Curses trickled out of his mouth, the brasses blared. Thirty ghosts with voices stifled by the regulations moved about in there, managed to live on top of each other, to scratch themselves without annoying their neighbours too much, to share the tepid water, black bread, and tiny bits of sugar equitably, to kill time, to kill fear. You could have drawn up a rather complete list of possible crimes—sordid ones and noble ones, imaginary, fictitious, real, unimaginable crimes—by cataloguing their stories, which they only told in whispers, for fear of informers.

"Say, that old fellow over there, to the right of the drooler who's lying down most of the time—he's one. They promised him something to make him listen. He listens to everything and then adds some. Wherever he goes, he'll get his—believe you me."

You could have drawn up an even more complete list of useless sufferings and benighted innocence by examining their ghostly consciences a little. The Elder was the biggest—in size—the boniest, and the wisest of the inhabitants of Chaos. Whenever there was trouble, his bushy eyebrows and granite chin would loom out of a haze of thick tobacco and establish order and peace. "I have all of Dostoyevsky in my Chaos No. 16 and more," he said proudly. "Thirty-one miseries this morning." Two Trotskyists, one genuine, the other doubtful, were quietly discussing Radek's objections to the theory of permanent revolution. The genuine one on the cot, the other under it. Mikhail Ivanovich spotted them, but he himself had abjured in the year '29, admitting that collectivization . . . They proved unfriendly.

Mikhail Ivanovich, at a loss, sought and won the sympathy of a pale hunchback who had illegally made soap. The half-dressed ghost who was strolling slowly along the boulevard—fifteen feet six inches from one end to the other—suddenly stopped and said in a rather loud voice:

"Citizens and Comrades! Excuse me for taking this great liberty. I can't go on. I request permission to cry. Do you hear, Elder? Permission to cry."

The Elder's steady voice emerged from the shadowy zone beneath the bright rectangle of the window.

"Cry as much as you like, as much as you can, old man. Here it's your only right as a citizen. I forbid you to laugh at him, comrades. Only try not to make noise. The regulations are the supreme law."

Everyone looked up. The dice and checker games broke off. The dice and checkers, made of dried bread-crumbs, instantly lost their significance. The man (he was no longer a ghost) had a terribly hollow face, the colour of walls, of earth, of bitterness, of madness. There are no words to describe that colour of the human face which no one has ever painted. Bristling with ashy whiskers, that face, and the eyes—holes with glowing depths. The man said:

"I'm charged with espionage. And I'm only a poor slob, citizens and comrades, I swear to you, only a poor slob!"

His words were convulsed like a sob, but his face remained dry. He had a bulging Adam's apple, an extremely thin neck ridged with tendons. After a pause, the Elder replied from the depths of his corner.

"What you're charged with is none of our business. I'd even say that it's none of your business. The authorities know what they're doing when they throw us in jail. We're all poor slobs, that's the saddest part of this whole story."

The "spy" looked around him with a kind of chagrin. His slender, dirty fingers moved up and down over his face. Dry, all over.

"And now I can't cry. I can't anymore, citizens, excuse me. It's over. What a bitch of a life. When will it all end?"

The Elder replied sententiously:

"The Permanent Session of Chaos No. 16 continues. Next point on the agenda."

* * *

Mikhail Ivanovich lived in Chaos for seven weeks. Weeks full of small events—the days went by very quickly although the hours were long and heavy—and completely empty in his memory. Men existed here in sharp relief, the accumulated hours crushed them, but time *per se* did not exist. Mikhail Ivanovich received a package from his wife: a good sign. It wasn't allowed in serious cases. The dozen hard-boiled eggs—which the guards had brutally broken and cut up with a dirty knife—proved to him that Ganna had not been fired from the Statistics Bureau on the 15th of the month. But the next Wednesday he waited in vain, anxious each time footsteps approached the door. Tatarev, the speculator, a flabby ruminant whose corpulent flesh was sagging more and more, received some delicacies which he shared: half for the men in the room, half for himself. He placed his half on his grey blanket and contemplated it. The little slices of rusk seemed golden. They radiated light. Tatarev stared at them until evening and ate them at night, with prolonged sniffing and irritating chewing-noises. Dirty ruminant. Two men had dysentery. They were left for several days in Chaos, which they filled with a fetid stench. Life was passing out of them, visibly, in bloody stools, all day, all night. One was a mechanic accused of sabotage, the other an ex-second-hand-dealer accused of fraud. Twice each day the Elder explained to the Section Supervisor:

"I'm telling you they're croaking, Comrade Chief, and that's against the hygiene regulations."

"All right, all right," said the supervisor. "They won't croak tonight. There's no room in the infirmary. Wait till tomorrow."

They must have been waiting for death to empty two beds in the infirmary before moving in these stinking moribund men. Upstairs, from nine to eleven, the bands played gallant tunes. The brunettes, the chestnuts, the blondes, even the redheads with brilliant shawls over their shoulders, danced around on the arms of soldiers.

A shirt was stolen from Aunty-Fat-Fart, a respectable young man accused of occultism on whom nature had inflicted a slightly disproportionate posterior. An aunt kept him supplied with edibles: hence his double

nickname. He rejected the idea of a general search, proposed by the Elder, as an indignity. But this provoked long debates, a whole moral crisis in the midst of Chaos, during which the thieves, who made up an organized faction under the presidency of Little-Guy Malych (of the Smolensk Square Marketplace), published their demand that the stolen object be restored during the night, or else they would make a point of finding the guilty party and depriving him of any desire to start in again. The next morning Aunty-Fat-Fart found his shirt at the foot of his straw mattress. It was intact except for a rather large square of cloth.

Something altogether extraordinary, secret, unbelievable, happened when Malych came back from the latrines—where they went twice a day, all together, to line up over the holes while the men from the second and third shifts stood waiting in front of them, the second shift with their pants already lowered, for the guards were at the door yapping "faster, faster"—the altogether extraordinary thing was that Little-Guy Malych came back with a pint of brandy for the Thieves' Faction. The fabulous liquor was drunk among initiates. Thus an elite revealed itself in Chaos. Kostrov was deeply moved when, at one a.m., a fellow from the Faction passed him a little of the divine tonic in the bottom of a tin cup. He had been thinking, for no reason, of Tamarochka's death; that little bit of alcohol sobered him up. He was sure that at that moment Tamarochka was asleep, all pink, with her fist closed under her chin and her Teddy-bear lying next to her.

The two Trotskyists of the first days had left. They were replaced by two others, workers from the Amo factory, one of whom, at least, didn't have the least understanding of ideas. There also arrived an extremely clean social-democratic bookkeeper, who was completely filthy by the next day—inexplicably. He tackled Kostrov on the question of workers' democracy: "You came to it twelve years late, esteemed comrade." Mikhail Ivanovich nearly lost his temper. "We have nothing, nothing in common with Menshevism. Between the Kautskyist counter-revolution and ourselves . . ."

They argued a lot, very hostile, yet amicable. The Menshevik looked Jewish. He knew the country around Ufa, Seymipalatinsk, Kansk, and Shenkursk, having been deported out there for seven years. This time he hoped to be sent to Kazakhstan. Later, Mikhail Ivanovich would never be

able to remember his face: for it was an ordinary face and they generally had their discussions in the dark, lying next to a partition. On the other hand, Mikhail Ivanovich could have recognized his interlocutor out of a thousand by the smell of his breath and by his unconscious habit of going *plock-plock* with his lips from time to time.

There were few serious cases in this Chaos. It wasn't like Chaos No. 18 where more than half the prisoners could expect to be bumped off within a few months. Here, there were only a postal clerk (parcel theft) and a cart-driver (theft of two sacks of grain) who ran a serious risk of having their skulls smashed by a bullet from a Nagan under the law of August 7, 1932 on the sacred character of collectivized property. The cart-driver talked about it without apparent feeling. "I'm a second offender, understand? They pardoned me once, I don't think they're likely to do it again." He passed the time lying with his hands under the back of his neck, observing everything, speaking rarely. His inner life found its sole expression, about once an hour, in the string of curses he mumbled to himself. "Ah! shit, ah! bastards, Goddam, Goddam." (In reality it was much stronger than that, and monotonous.) The postal clerk, young and blond, a member of the Communist Youth, seemed more confident. Little-Guy Malych, who guessed this at first glance, had told him in front of everyone, on the boulevard:

"You're not a bad guy, but you're a born rat. I'm not worried about the solidity of your skull-bone; you're destined to have an honourable career in the concentration camps. You'll watch while the other guys are breaking up the rocks, and you'll fill in little cards, and you'll be a member of the shock brigade. Don't deny it, it's for sure; as sure as you squealed on your buddies. Don't bother to deny it, brother, I won't press it."

The postal clerk turned crimson. The Elder was rarely visible, but his voice would always rise up just in time from behind a screen of acrid smoke. It liquidated the incident before it got started.

"Shut your trap, Malych. No one has the right to impugn the perfect honour of a citizen of Chaos."

The Elder intrigued Mikhail Ivanovich. Twice a week the guard supplied him with a few pieces of toilet-paper, and he would plant himself in the

middle of the boulevard and propose:

"Anyone want to write to the proletarian authorities?"

With his long, thick hair, his black, close-cropped beard, his pale flesh under deep-set eyes, standing with his long legs spread apart, he spoke the words with an undefinable accent of mockery. "Counter-revolutionary?" wondered Mikhail Ivanovich. One day, having offered him his portion of soup (he had a little fever that day) he addressed him: "And you, Elder, what article of the penal code brings you here?"

Usually people told each other this information gladly. Besides they didn't give any details unless they wanted to confide in someone, and so it was not much of an indication. The Elder gave a strange wink and replied:

"That I won't tell you, my dear fellow. Maybe I don't know myself. There are cases like that, there are. In Chaos, you see, half the brothers are liars; and half the others don't know what they're saying, because neither the ones nor the others know what's happening to them. I must tell you I believe in destiny. Sure as truth, we each have our own destiny and there's also an overall destiny for everybody where everything equals out in the end, like, you might say, when they balance their figures at the Planning Commission . . . Only, I'm sure you'll admit, you can't live without secrets. Chaos needs a mystery. Well, it's me. No one knows what I am. I'll never tell. Not to anybody. Not even to Them."

The word *Them* took on strange proportions in his mouth and eyes. It embraced the ten concrete storeys, the two hundred offices, the special battalions, the Secret Collegium, everything unknown about that powerful, complicated and fabulous structure through which men are carried along as inexorably as grains in a winnowing machine.

"They can hold me till the Last Judgement, comrade, I won't tell them anything. Anything. Understand? They'd like to know everything, ha ha ha! And maybe they don't even know what they want from me. Me, I keep my mouth shut. That's the secret. Maybe there's nothing. Maybe there's *everything*."

The word *everything* contained a threat, a confession, terror, night, irony —everything. The Elder laughed. His mouth planted with strong yellow

teeth was sound; under his bushy eyebrows a tiny light—very far off—shone in his eyes.

Then, serious, he bent over, almost touching Mikhail Ivanovich's ear. "You're right to write them little papers every three days. It's necessary."

"Why?" asked Mikhail Ivanovich.

"For all the boxes they have; they number the little papers and they file them in boxes, and the boxes in cabinets and there are fifteen storeys of cabinets, brother. It's important."

Mikhail Ivanovich thought the Elder was putting him on; in any case, he didn't let anything show. "No," Mikhail Ivanovich said to himself, "he's crazy." But from that time on he respected him all the more. And he continued to write little papers every three days.

To the Comrade Judge responsible for investigating political cases . . . appeal by . . . member of the Party since 1917.

To the Comrade Procurator in charge of Control of the State Political Administration . . . appeal by . . . member of the Party since 1917.

To the comrade Chairman of the Special Collegium of the State Political Administration . . . appeal by . . .

To the Comrade Chairman of the Central Control Commission of the Party . . . app. . . .

They were little squares of toilet paper written in aniline pencil; the texts were indignant, humble, begging, precise, childish, cloudy, tortuous, false and true. Since twenty-odd citizens of Chaos were writing, the Elder would hand over a whole sheaf twice a week to the Head Guard.

* * *

When Mikhail Ivanovich was suddenly removed from this subterranean world, brought back to the surface of the earth, to the bright daylight of ordinary life, he found himself in a rather neat little office adorned with a picture of the Chief hanging opposite a map of Moscow. The window looked out on roofs powdered with sunshine; belfrys tinted a delicious green attracted the eye. It was reassuring to see life going on so peacefully. The last remains of smoke-soiled snow were melting on the sides of roofs which faced North. The guard waited motionless at the door. The little

office was empty. Mikhail Ivanovich turned his head and recognized himself —barely, with an unpleasant little shock—in the glass front of a cabinet full of files. His disembodied image flickered there against a backdrop of old papers. He had grown thin, old, and pale. His nose seemed to him hardened, yet somehow empty: this hobo's face with its unruly beard expressed a strange inconsistency. Mikhail Ivanovich recognized in himself the inhabitant of Chaos. "Citizen of Chaos" he said to himself with bitter irony, for he had just thought: "God, this way of living breaks your body down fast."

"Good day, Mikhail Ivanovich," said a cordial voice from behind him.

The investigating judge, a handsome officer of about thirty with a pipe in his mouth, regarded him as an old acquaintance. "Sit down. Cigarettes?"

The interview made no sense. When all was said and done, Mikhail Ivanovich was not accused of anything. Only this: it would be a good idea if he would examine his own conscience. No one doubted his devotion. Indeed, that was why they were appealing to it in this instance. The two men seated smoking on opposite sides of the table seemed to be playing a complicated game by means of sentences with double meanings in which veiled threats mingled with wheedling entreaties. The tone changed from fatherly to official. "Well, it will be as you wish!" concluded the investigating judge. "Excuse me, I don't have much time."

At that moment Mikhail Ivanovich exploded: "No! Come on now! What kind of dirty game is this? Are you putting me on? I want to know what this is all about, do you understand? And I want you to know under what conditions you're holding me. That such prisons exist in the fifteenth year of the revolution is a disgraceful abomination. I doubt that Fascist prisons . . ."

"Oh! Oh!" the investigating judge said softly, "that's an unfortunate comparison. It smells of counter-revolution a mile off."

Mikhail Ivanovich blushed. Moreover, his momentary fury had exhausted him. The beating of his heart filled his chest with an oppressive noise. He tried to take a cigarette, but his trembling fingers found only emptiness under the silk-paper in the judge's box. "Calm yourself," said the judge. "I had no idea you were so badly housed. Nonetheless, a

knowledgeable militant like yourself ought to understand that we are swamped with work. I spend my nights at it, esteemed comrade, and I don't get any days off. If our houses of detention are overcrowded, it's not the fault of the proletarian dictatorship but that of the counter-revolution which assails us on every side. Forgive me for reminding you of these basic truths. Drink a glass of water. I'll have you put into an individual cell, you'll be well off there. Goodbye, Mikhail Ivanovich. Think it over, Mikhail Ivanovich."

He was pushing the prisoner out by the shoulders, gently and cordially. In the dark corridor down which Mikhail Ivanovich walked, followed by his guard, all the numbered doors were closed. A door opened suddenly and a young woman with wild blonde hair and circles under her big eyes, emerged so violently that she nearly bumped into him. "Not so fast, citizeness," said an unseen male voice, in deep and commanding tones. It was already over, part of the past; never again would those big circled eyes, that wild blonde hair reappear. Mikhail Ivanovich swore to himself, "Goddam! This really is Chaos—and that sonofabitch who—that sonofabitch with his cigarettes and his sanctimonious mug . . ."

Elevator. Two men, face to face again, touching: one heavy-set, well built, erect in his tight-fitting uniform. The other shaky, distracted by an itching armpit, overcome with sickening anger. "Enter, citizen" (politely). Mikhail Ivanovich heard the cell door close. The man in the elevator had been faceless: a standard oval instead of a face, an oval. Mikhail Ivanovich was expecting Chaos and suddenly there was silence, order, soft light, solitude. He turned around: the door. Further, the window. Bars. Iron bolts outside. The cot. He sat down, suddenly sad enough to cry. Inexplicably. All those companions of moments past—gone forever. And this solitude, this private talk with this other self who no longer looked like him, bearded and dirty, overcome with anger, his cold reason impaired. Shoulders hunched, head in hands, he closed his eyes. "I was wrong to complain about Chaos. Ah!" It might have been the same if he had not complained. Ah! The silence was crushing him. "I should have asked for some books." The table was bare. What a strange uprooting! The Elder's grave, ironic voice, Little-Guy Malych's wink, Tatarev's wrinkled cheeks, Chaos's odour of human animals

and rough tobacco. Nostalgia for all that caught in his throat. Separated—forever—from that squalor, alone here, alone, alone, alone, alone, alone . . .

The first night was heavy, despite the satisfaction of clean underwear and sheets. Ganna, Tamarochka—what were they doing at this moment? He was about to fall asleep when a face approached his face. Wild blonde hair over her forehead, hollow, deepset blue eyes, bottomless stare, dark mouth. The dark mouth murmured: "They're torturing me, do you hear? I can't answer all those questions, questions all night, always the same, always different. I'm going crazy, do you hear? Well." (The voice became pleading with Ganna's intonation.) "So help me, Mikhail Ivanovich." And suddenly the eyes were no longer blue but brown and there were thin tortoise-shell circles around them, and it was Ganna, Ganna being tortured. "Micha," she said, "Micha. Let's get it over with. Don't fight it any more, I can't go on any longer, Micha, have pity on us."

He came out of this nightmare with his forehead drenched in sweat; he saw himself lying in the glare of the electric bulb, the silence of the night, the solitude—outside of time. And the days and nights flowed into the void, peacefully.

* * *

It all began with a dull pain in the area of the heart. But was it the area of the heart? We don't know precisely where our heart is nor what it is. His thoughts immediately swerved away from their usual meanderings and steered, through bizarre twists and turns, toward an anxious place. The pain persisted, as if it enjoyed resting there, in that warm breast. Mikhail Ivanovich remembered a hand lying on his flesh on that spot, a refreshing hand which lingered. Ganna murmured: "I love to hear your heart beating. And yet it's awful to hear a heart beating. Sometimes at night I'm afraid of mine." Those words and that gesture had never before come up in his memory: now they brought a grimace, perhaps a smile of helplessness, to his face, on which beads of sweat were beginning to form. The pain expanded, burrowing, penetrating his being at the place-where-the-heart-is. He felt that his nose was growing thinner, that the skin on his temples was

like a sheet of parchment and that a sweat which was at once cold and burning (or neither cold nor burning, worse, a sweat of anguish) was moistening his face. Control yourself, it's just a heart attack—and if it were something worse? Control yourself anyway, control yourself. Lying on his back, he often stared at the lines and shadows that stood out on the white ceiling of the cell. His imagination picked out shapes among them—motionless forms which he changed at will. He would try to bring them back again: a Japanese mask, a head that looked vaguely like Pushkin's, an armless female torso, a sail . . . The sweat and the pain were stronger than this silly game. His mind was nothing more than a tiny lamp cowering somewhere under his skull, illuminating a murky inner collapse. The pain prowled all around his flesh: he closed his eyes, opened them again—it had no limits. No . . . Sweat, mortal sweat. In the ceiling, the electric bulb.

And the pain vanished, as it had come. Mikhail Ivanovich Kostrov, Lecturer in Hist. Mat. (Historical Materialism) at the Communist University named after Sverdlov, rose from his prisoner's cot in his shorts and shirtsleeves, ran to the door, barefoot on the cold floor, rapped softly on the spy-hole and listened to the peacefully-lighted silence of the cell. Soft footsteps glided down the corridor, fingers snapped, low voices conferred. Reality returned all in one piece, all at once. A neighbouring door opened and closed. "Hmm, they're still interrogating him. Hmm . . ." The door suddenly opened and Mikhail Ivanovich stepped back as an enormous, broad-shouldered guard—belts, straps—entered and marched towards him, observing everything—the unmade bed, the chamber pot, the bare table, a crust of bread, every object and even the man, the prisoner: his dubious undershorts, his shirt, unbuttoned over his hairy chest, his bare feet which were brown like gypsies' feet and hairy too.

"What's the matter, citizen?"

Nothing. There was nothing any more. After all, the fact that maybe I nearly died is of no importance to you, citizen, to these walls, to *Them*. Mikhail Ivanovich felt this more than he thought it, with a little self-pity mixed with sudden anger against them. He frowned, his nostrils flared as they did when he got mean, he said politely, nastily (he was never more

polite than when bad temper made his nostrils quiver, and this was easy to see):

"Nothing. I thought I felt ill. Excuse me, esteemed comrade, for having disturbed you."

The guard considered him with human eyes: brown, shrewd, devoid of kindness—ah! eyes which performed their duty admirably.

"Yes. You're sweating. That happens. Go back to bed. I'll send you the doctor tomorrow."

That happens? What happens? Mikhail Ivanovich went back to bed, pulled up the blanket.

"Don't go to such trouble," he said smiling. "It's unnecessary. I'll show your doctor the door, dear comrade."

Curtly, he turned over against the wall. The shrewd eyes observed him for a moment, attentively. The bolt slid shut, there was silence, nocturnal light, the roughness of the grey-painted wall, the feeble well-being of a body relaxing after a crisis, the approach of sleep, the last thoughts before sleep, nearly always the same ones. Welcome thoughts, unwelcome thoughts.

. . . Living is never done with
and every day we're the same,
vain, vain, vain, pain . . .

His heart was beating regularly.

* * *

In the dark corner beneath the window, the dampness softened the paint on the wall. It was there that Mikhail Ivanovich made a scratch every morning with his nail; every seven days he drew a longer line—it was his calendar. "Four months already!" Although it seemed senseless, the passage of time somehow eased this whole nasty business. No one bothered with him any more, and he merely sent a few words of useless protest to the prosecutor in charge of control or to other high officials once a week. Jokers! Frauds! Pious rogues, beyond a doubt. The cell's restfulness did its work, he felt a little better after all the strain—yet tormented by worry at

night because of that pain in the area of his heart which came back every three or four days. He asked for the doctor. Around eleven o'clock the next morning, the Chief Guard entered quietly, carefully examined the window-bars, the bare table, the waxed floor. Then, satisfied: "You asked for the doctor?" There then appeared a personage in a white smock and, in a totally neutral voice, with a glance so neutral it seemed to see nothing: "What is your problem?" The first time, Mikhail Ivanovich carefully explained that it was his heart. The personage in the white smock was carrying a box suspended across his chest. He opened it, removed three pills from a compartment with a tweezers, and said: "One every morning." When the door was closed again, Mikhail Ivanovich broke into wild guffaws. That pill, all ready to calm, revive, invigorate, perhaps cure an unknown heart, that mechanical perfection—the man, the white smock, the little box, the tweezers, the pill—attained an absolute imbecility. The spy-hole opened, a voice hissed: "Citizen, laughter is forbidden." Mikhail Ivanovich let out another guffaw, even louder. The door opened, a strapping peasant in uniform took two steps into the cell and said severely: "Please, Citizen, stop laughing. It's forbidden."

Mikhail Ivanovich felt he was going joyfully mad. The three pills on the table took on a fire-green hue, they were about to leap into the air, all by themselves, swell up into balloon-heads, and burst into wild laughter. He was ready to holler, to stamp with rage, for his laughter was swelling into fury and tears were clouding his eyes.

"Please be quiet, Citizen," said the guard even more quietly. "I'm the one who'll get punished for you."

"They've really got us—tied to one another," thought Mikhail Ivanovich as the laughter died out within him. Another night his pain got worse. It must have been at the beginning of the fifth month. He had been reading for two weeks. They brought him stacks of old yellowed books. When the white-smocked personage reappeared, he curtly turned his back. "Heart again?" he said. Mikhail Ivanovich gave no answer. The tweezers placed three little pills on the edge of the table, the neutral voice murmured: "One in the evening. Anyway, it will calm you . . ."

That day Mikhail Ivanovich's cell was changed, inexplicably. He lost the pentagon-shaped patch of sky formed by the outer bars in the upper corner of the window. His new cell, one floor lower, was less bright; and all he could see of the world was a patch of grey stonework. He lost his calendar, the addition of weeks and months, and decided to live outside time. He lost the end of a Wells novel about the future. Between the lines of the text, lettered in minuscule, pale pencil-marks to escape the vigilant eyes of the librarians, a maniac had written several times over: "Pray for the executioners, pray for the victims, pray for me." An intense sadness swept down over Mikhail Ivanovich. He forbade himself to think about Ganna, about Tamarochka. He forbade himself to think about himself, about the future. He forbade himself to try to understand any more. He clenched his jaws, frowned, and paced back and forth until bedtime, reviewing in his mind Rosa Luxemburg's theory of the accumulation of capital along with Dvoyalatzki's objections, Bukharin's and his own.

Having smoked all his cigarettes and devoured his hunk of black bread as he paced, he went to bed at the signal. According to Bukharin, "under an hypothetical State Capitalism, where the capitalist class would be consolidated into a single trust, and in which the economy would be organized, although class antagonisms would remain, there would be no crises, despite the underconsumption of the masses, since reciprocal demand among all sectors of production as well as consumer demand would be established in advance." Bukharin will go far with his formulas for a capitalism so perfectly organized that it ends up resembling socialism in all its features—except for justice. "What am I saying here? How did that entity, justice, unknown in economics, get into this?" The approach of sleep impaired his thinking. Mikhail Ivanovich observed himself on the brink of succumbing to the oldest form of idealism. At that instant, pain came to life under his left breast. And what do you have to say about death, old brother? Is it metaphysical twaddle, an entity, or what? Nothing to do with economics either, death. The pain made him gasp and bite the pillow. It extinguished the last worldly light within him—that hard profusion of electricity falling from the ceiling—carried him off into a dark rocking beyond, beyond . . . Somewhere within his brain or his soul, the

imprisoned ideas continued their useless course. "And yet the revolution . . ." He gasped.

* * *

Did they have to wait until he was sick before springing that surprise on him! Nervous wrinkles were etching themselves around his nose, he felt like acting rude. Yes, like calling this comrade chief a camel, explaining to him that he positively looked like a camel. But the camel is a useful, patient beast. It crosses deserts; it has a precious function in trade; it carried ancient civilizations on its humps. Whereas you, citizen! I don't know what slimy responsibilities you carry on your back nor where your caravan is leading us. In any case, you are one of those people who cost the revolution dear. Mikhail Ivanovich, naked, was thinking these thoughts while a doctor listened to his chest. "Turn around. Good. Lie down. No malaria?" The room was naked too. Seated, with his legs comfortably crossed, an officer of about fifty was observing the naked man—his nervous wrinkles, his beard, thick and heavy under his chin, broad around the cheeks, the simian beard of a stubborn prisoner. This officer had two little red rectangles on his collar: thus the rank of a major or a department head, probably a confidential aide of Comrade Molchanov, candidate member of the Central Committee, member of the Collegium of the United State Political Administration *(OGPU)*, member of the Special Board, director of the Secret Service in charge of oppositionists.

"Get dressed," said the doctor.

The doctor was filling in a questionnaire. He wrote something on a pink card which he handed to the Major-Department Head to read. The latter asked a question in a low voice, then, having heard the answer, murmured,

"Ah! Very good!"

Mikhail Ivanovich heard him. All his life this officer probably had no more to say than *Ah! Very Good!* Stupid and self-satisfied. When, on his night-table, under the silk lampshade, he finds this note from his wife: "I love another man and you're nothing but a clod"—he'll say mechanically *Ah! Very Good!* When they chuck his own arse into prison for administrative

abuse (15,000 roubles of unjustifiable travel expenses), he will look right into the eyes of his chief, his double in every respect, and he'll certainly say, *Ah! Very good, Comrade Chief.*

"Come," said the Major.

The two men were in a soberly-furnished private office. French books behind the glass front of a bookcase.

"You read French novels?" asked Mikhail Ivanovich in an aggressive voice.

"No time."

Nothing on the table but a telephone and some push-buttons. The Major was looking calmly at Mikhail Ivanovich. He pushed forward a pack of amazing five-rouble cigarettes. Waited until Mikhail Ivanovich got comfortable in his armchair, lighted up. Waited another moment for Mikhail Ivanovich to get nervous. Sighed and, as if in an aside, said *Hmm, Hmm* in a vexed tone of voice.

"My nerves are steady," Mikhail Ivanovich said to himself. "Keep up your little game." In reality he was beginning to feel scared. The pink card had appeared on the table and the Major was reading it over. Brusquely:

"Your wife and your child are well."

"Ah! Very good."

"Now I'm the one saying *Ah! Very good,*" Mikhail Ivanovich thought bitterly. Might we be interchangable? That would be curious. A double-edged idea.

"You are . . . rather seriously ill."

"*Ah! Very good.*"

"And I really don't know what you're doing in prison."

"Wonderful to hear you say so," exhaled Mikhail Ivanovich through a fat smoke-ring.

The Major shrugged. His meaningless voice, like a streamlet of grey water, intoned words, words.

"There's really no point in the two of us behaving like diplomats. First of all, we know everything. Much more than you think, anyway. You're not quite an enemy. You're not quite with us. Don't get angry, I know your dossier by heart. You quit the Opposition in June 1928, in agreement with

Ivan Nikitich Smirnov. But on the questionnaire of the Central Control Commission you left the section concerning your relations with other oppositionists blank. Despite this lack of confidence in the Party, which in reality made you unworthy of the Party's confidence, you were reinstated. Four months later you wrote, in a letter addressed to a counter-revolutionary who has been cast out of the Party and has paid for his crimes . . ."

If a bell had started clanging at full peal in his chest, Mikhail Ivanovich would not have heard it with more deafening clarity than he heard the heavy beating of his heart. Temples constricted, throat tight, breathing short. Sacha arrested. That's why he no longer answered his mail. But why, for God's sake, why?

"You wrote: 'Collectivization, in its present form with all its violence and disorder, will end up by turning the entire peasantry against the dictatorship of the proletariat.' You made veiled allusions to the disorders in Uzbekistan. Note that I could ask you how you came by your information about them and remind you of the penalties for domestic espionage. We have that letter. We had a copy of it at the time, and now we are in possession of the original. You added, 'I'm afraid that I. N. was in error. He is blinded by his loyalty and, in that matter of the missing editions, Trubkin-Pipeface is duping him as he is duping all of us . . .' Do you recall that? Is it possible that I remember your style better than you yourself? These things sometimes happen. Trubkin-Pipeface! Aren't you blushing? Do you think we didn't understand? You, an old underground worker, using such a childish cover-name for the recognized leader of the Party. Will you deny it? Don't make a sign. Better think it over first.

"You were something of a wit. If I charged you with counter-revolutionary talk, perhaps you would protest? But when you were telling funny stories to aspiring actresses, did you think you were still a faithful member of the Party? 'Do you know the difference between a great misfortune and a national disaster, Zina Valentinovna? Imagine a very great leader falling to the sidewalk from the eighth floor balcony of the Central Committee. That would be a great misfortune. Now imagine him surviving. That would be a national disaster.' I can't imitate the way you

told it, Mikhail Ivanovich. The joke loses its flavour, doesn't it? You sent her far, to a very cold climate, that little goose of a Zina Valentinovna, with your witty remarks which she went around repeating everywhere. Will you deny that in precise language this is what is known as discrediting the leaders of the party?"

Mikhail Ivanovich felt himself blush, then turn pale. Then his forehead grew damp.

"I'd rather not go into your conversations with Kostychev, who passed you Numbers 10 and 14 of the *Bulletin of the Opposition*. I could quote your own words to you, describe the scornful way you pronounced certain names in private . . ."

Kostychev, Kostychev too! A double agent, a coward, or . . . Yet it's totally impossible. Anyway, they wouldn't use his name if he were. Then who? Maybe his wife? That drab blonde who was sleeping behind the screen —who was pretending to sleep, who was probably listening—while we whispered, face to face. There we were, our elbows on newspaper, the empty liquor glasses in front of us, both of us deathly sad, alone, hardly daring to confess our enormous apprehension?

"You teach. If one analysed your course on the French Revolution, page by page, it would reveal such insidious counter-revolutionary propaganda that you would never—no, never—leave the concentration camps. Who were you aiming at in your lessons on Barras, Tallien, Bourdon? And your *distinguo* between Right and Left Thermidorians, the authentic ones and the in-spite-of-themselves. Ha! Ha! Do you imagine that we were fast asleep and that all of the youth who listened to you were betraying the Party like yourself? Not a single line about Babeuf that isn't a criminal allusion."

Motionless, head erect, with a sort of grimace stamped on his face, Mikhail Ivanovich felt prostrate with indignation and disgust. Corrupt idiots! You see allusions in every line because the Babeufs of today are in your prisons. You're a living allusion to every kind of counter-revolution. But impossible, useless, to say a word. Any word would be turned against itself, would mean, after rolling in that muddy stream, the opposite of the truth. And fear was there too. The drab voice continued:

"You finally decided to abandon your apparent submission to the Party, you formed with Kostychev and Ilin a Committee of Three . . ."

"That's untrue," cried Mikhail Ivanovich. "Untrue! Untrue, untrue!"

"It's true," continued the drab voice. "You're wrong to get angry. They confessed. I have their signed statements right here. They implicate you overwhelmingly. You have raised a criminal hand against the Party. I no longer know what might save you except for a sincere repentance whose sincerity will have to be demonstrated."

So that's what they're getting at. They know very well that what they say is false. What do they want? The cigarette between Mikhail Ivanovich's stiff fingers—which were somehow foreign to his being—had gone out with a long cylinder of ash hanging on it. That ash fell softly. Thus a worn-down will collapses. All of this leads nowhere. All of this is absurd. Resist? Useless. They can do anything. Give in again, play their game, humiliate yourself, lie, where does that lead to? He remembered the auscultation with dull anger. . . .

"Comrade Judge," he said harshly, "all these aberrations have tired me out. Send me back to my cell, I need sleep. Anyway, I won't answer you any more."

Ponderously, he got to his feet, supporting himself on the edge of the table with both hands, unaware that he was reeling. *Ah! Very good*, he said with a kind of wild joy, as if he had just recognized the man seated opposite him, whose hand was softly caressing the holster of his revolver.

"Listen, esteemed Comrade Investigating Judge, to some lines of poetry I'm fond of:

In his heart there remained
one hundred twenty beats
one hundred twenty beats . . .

but the most extraordinary thing was that the man didn't give a good goddam . . .

"Do you want," said the inquisitor, "to request a visit from your wife?"

"No."

* * *

The most sensible thing would be to die, and that's probably what will happen to me (". . . one hundred twenty beats . . .") Farewell Ganna, Tamarochka. Ganna will remarry. That fat Bykov once wooed her; who knows if they're not sleeping together already. How else could she live with her salary as a statistician? Bykov has oily skin and a pig-like expression; Ganna's flesh is smooth and cool; her soul is like her flesh, only more defenceless. Let him penetrate that flesh and intrude on that soul. Farewell Ganna, the child must live.

Such nagging, base thoughts plunged the man on the cot into a state of unpleasant queasiness.

I'm not jealous, yet I feel nauseous as if I were seasick.

We were beaten in 1923, thanks to our faith. We still had confidence: it was already too late. Only a few thousand of us were left who wanted to continue the Revolution, which everyone had had enough of. The world was subsiding into inertia and nothing was finished. We were theorizing, searching for correct formulations, for explosive truths while the others—and there were a hundred of them for every one of us—only wanted to spend the summers at watering-places, bring home silk stockings for their wives, sleep with well-fleshed creatures. And you, too, Brother. You spent your Sundays playing cards and drinking the sweet wines of Crimea. Then you walked Masha home along the banks of the Moika—a laughing Masha with shining white teeth in a moon face. You didn't love her, you knew you would never love her and you didn't talk about love. She consulted you absent-mindedly about Party history, but she knew very well that once you reached the shade of the Summer Garden, you would grasp her elbows with determined hands and cover her face with moist kisses without speaking a word. She was waiting for that moment with all her being. Remember the sight of her head thrown back willingly, cool, closed lips, eyes shut. And then you would move on in silence and then, in the light of a first lamp, you would continue in a polite voice: *After the Second Congress, Masha, the unity tendency . . .*

You knew very well that you were breaking her heart. Now this pale memory is breaking your heart. For your life is over. You're still attached to it since your flesh still remembers these feelings. Of no importance. You think you're unique and that the universe would be empty without you. In reality you occupy in the world the place of an ant in the grass. The ant moves along carrying a louse-egg—a momentous task for which it was born. You crush it without knowing, without being aware of it. Without the ant itself being aware of it. Nothing changes. There will be ants until the end of the world who will bravely carry louse-eggs through the tunnels of the city. Don't suffer on account of your nullity. Let it reassure you. You lose so little when you lose yourself—and the world loses nothing. You can see very well, from up in an aeroplane, that cities are anthills . . .

Tiflis, the Kazbek, the Elbrus, Rostov, Moscow from high in the air. The glaciers are stars smashed across the earth. Why did that other within you want so much to fall that day? You were scared and the other leaned toward the glaciers with a tender vertigo. It was because you were crossing borders within yourself. Never had you appeared lower to yourself than during those sky-drenched moments. From that day, your courage and rectitude end. No more heights. Now you will walk through the flatlands of cowardice. You had just made up your mind to break, and you kept repeating to yourself: *resistance is impossible, impossible*—when Mount Metek appeared, divided into blocks of glowing-red stone and near-black shadow by the light of the setting sun. The foam-flecked Kura was refreshing to see: women were washing out clothes on its banks—Tamaras, Tatianas—and you spoke to them with tenderness, you whose presence they couldn't even imagine, peering down at them from a height of one thousand metres, saying: "Young women, I'm a coward, don't love a man like me." At the barred windows of the castle there were certainly prisoners' faces raised to watch the flight of the R. 2 in which you sat strapped, helmeted, intoxicated with speed, with your secret governmental message from the Central Committee of Georgia to the C. C. of the Federal Union —and your little defeat, your vile little defeat . . .

How beautiful the earth was! Steppes, then forests: a living, moving map, rich colours, oceans of foliage stretched to infinity. You were both blinded

by the sunlight. Gregor turned around, shouting against the thundering of the propeller—and suddenly you were falling, falling with magnificent slowness. The hidden forest revealed tall outcroppings of rock divided into blue and gold by amazing shadows. A river of sky flowed around them. And then you nearly cried out with joy at the idea of falling, while fear made your limbs quiver with mild hysteria. The loss of the secret envelope would have put off for a few more days a few more iniquities in the vertical fall of a revolution. The propeller, which had fallen silent, exploded into life again. Rostov appeared on the horizon like a great heavy shadow concentrated on the earth—into which the sea seemed to plunge like a twisted steel blade.

We were beaten in 1927. Sacha returned from Wuhan. You were running around to workers' rooms in the Zamoskvarechie district with typewritten papers in your tunic. With every flight of stairs you climbed, you discovered more of the old misery. The victorious proletariat back in the slums. Time blackened the wallpaper, squiggles of smoke were visible on the walls in corners and you could imagine the naked man separating from the warm woman in the night to burn out bed bugs. A sordid life. Five or six faces were asking: What news? Each had come by circuitous routes in order to throw "shadows" off the track. You thought: "*They* know everything anyway: besides, among these five there is certainly one double-agent. Which woman? Which man?" The news, comrades, is this: Trotsky was able to speak for five minutes at the C. C. in the midst of shouting and catcalling. Twenty-nine expulsions at the *Bogatyr* factory. Wuhan is disavowing the Changsha peasant uprising. Treint is coming over to the Opposition in France.

It was the only piece of good news for the moment and much discussed, but you knew that in that vast shipwreck it was really of no importance. You didn't say so, you did your duty, you explained Treint's theses. The only real hope was a return to illegality. Fill the jails with devoted men since everything is going to pieces. Start again from the beginning. And then? Then they'll begin killing us off. They won't make the mistake of letting us live on in prison. Then what? Hold out anyway. Maybe a few will survive. But the cowards? Those who are tired? Sacha, back from China with memories full of blood, spoke to you that night as you drank the last of the

tea at opposite ends of a battered sofa. (Books were lying pell-mell on the shelves around you. The desk was dead—ashes and rusty pens. What's the point of putting anything in its place since . . .) Sacha was saying:

"With scientific methods of repression, not a single typewriter can escape surveillance any more. There will be as many stool-pigeons as comrades. More, if necessary. Believe me, it's finished. After Germany, after China. There's nothing left for us but to write ourselves off. The revolution will be stranded on the beach for the next twenty years. The last to talk about it will be right, sublimely right, but they will be broken on the rack. Give me a drink. No, fill up my glass. As long as I'm not completely drunk, I can't help seeing things clearly. Listen, brother. The Chinese are magnificent. At night our unions have little posters pasted up: 'Comrades, calm, discipline, etc. Surrender your weapons. . . .' In the morning the streets are full of young officers in khaki with round glasses. Dirty sons of bitches from any angle. They grab anyone—a worker's mug is easy to recognize, you understand—and drag him before a young, principled lieutenant who says one word without looking at the bugger. And you notice that there is also a big brute with a shaved head and a curved sabre standing there. The worker kneels down without a word and holds out his neck. Talk about people who know how to hold their tongues in front of executioners! It's unforgettable. It's horrible. The brute winds up, the sabre whirls, the head comes off all at once, a fountain of blood spurts out a full metre. I was standing smoking on the sidewalk next to two Americans who smelled of whiskey. I had the formal directive of the Executive in my pocket: 'Prohibit and disavow resistance.' Never have I wanted so much to be recognized by chance and killed in a corner. If that had happened before passing on the directive, my death might have been of some service to the revolution."

Sacha went on:

"Yet we must sign Ivan Nikitich's paper. Capitulate. What else do you want us to do? Going to jail wouldn't accomplish anything. At least let them give us a chance to build factories, to prevent the specialists—with their irresistible and false expertise which leads God-knows-where—from taking that away from us. Piatakov is right: let's become technicians. If the revolution is able to come back to life one day, it will be on the basis of a

revitalized technology with a new proletariat. We'll be finished by that time, but we will have contributed something. Those who talk of resisting are crazy: either they'll be crushed like fleas, or the counter-revolution will support them at first and later carry them along with it."

"But isn't it already supporting the Central Committee?"

You only dared say such things because you were pretty drunk. And Sacha shouted: "Of course! We're between two counter-revolutions—how clear can anything be!" He threw the empty bottle out of the window into an empty lot where sparrows were hopping about. Your face felt like a block of stone with welded jaws. Forty-five years old. Worn out. More cowardice than strength.

"Sacha, my friend, I feel like smashing you in the face! And I want you to beat me senseless."

"No," said Sacha, seriously. "I'll fetch another bottle."

Sacha is in jail. A ferocious petty-bourgeoisie hunts us down even when we surrender. They're afraid of our past, of our silences. When we give in, they imagine we're trying to trick them. When we join them, out of lassitude and in order to live, they're afraid we'll betray them one day. The men of '17 and '20 will never seem emasculated enough for them. They have seen the promised land, tasted of the new bread, gone through the trials of fire, hunger, and conviction: of the truth. These have marked them forever.

Too bad for us.

* * *

The next morning he asked for paper to write to the Central Committee —and wrote out one more surrender. All the right words were there: The edification of socialism, the great wisdom of the C.C., the correctness of its tactics, the repudiation of errors due to lack of understanding, to the petty-bourgeois spirit, to the counter-revolutionary influence of ex-comrades now denounced and repudiated. He wrote it out with his features clenched, his mouth pursed into an expression at once bad-tempered and scornful. When

he had finished, he swallowed his saliva, began a smile which ended in a yawn, stretched, and heard himself say out loud:

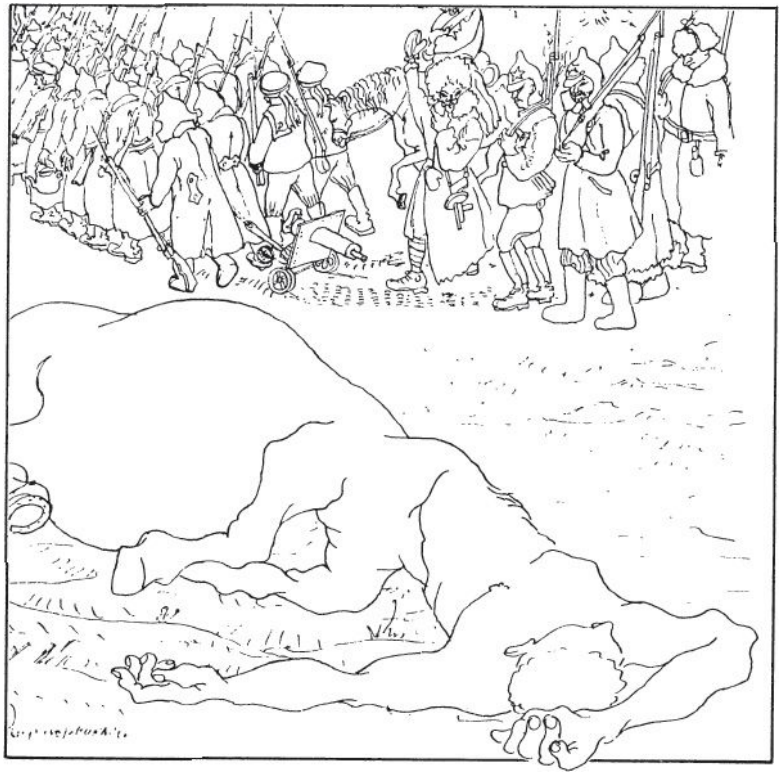
"Go on, you rotten fraud!"

The spyhole in the door opened half way. "It is forbidden to speak aloud, Citizen."

Kostrov answered with a kind of bluster:

"Here is my letter to the C.C., Citizen."

* For further details about hyperlinked words, click on them or see the Glossary at the end of this volume.



II. BLACK-WATERS

The ice-floes break up late on the Chernaya—toward the middle of May. By then the snows have disappeared, except in a few shady glens. Water stands in shimmering pools on the plain, and whole flocks of birds come to splash and frolic in them. With its white cover gone, the earth is conquered by water, wings, and sky. Where do so many birds come from? Some fly in V-formations. Others gather in clouds which sweep, swirl and spread like nebulae. A calm joy stretches between earth and sky. At the end of the day the people of Chernoe gather on the bluff overlooking the river to contemplate the expanses where spring is coming to life. These are careful people, like the muddy earth they tread, like the whole town with its log houses which time has faded to the colour of ash.

An old woman murmurs: "The grebes are back . . . (*Sigh.*) In my day, little father . . ." Were there more grebes in her day, spreading their wings over the steppes? A man, cap pulled low over his eyes, huddled in his short russet-coloured fur jacket, speaks aloud to himself: "It'll be another week yet before the Chernaya is completely open." Young voices protest: "Don't lie, citizen, a week! You crazy?" Another week would be too long for that lust for life that comes over you after the snow melts, after seven cold months that chill you to the very soul. ("All the more 'cause you don't eat; nothing but sour cabbage soup and rye bread—it all adds up to shit and there's not enough of it; I ask you, Citizen, can your body survive this cold without consuming any fat?") The sky takes on a pearly, almost azure hue; a kind of peace descends from it. You might mistake it for hope.

"If you let yourself get taken in," snickers Avelii, a young man with a sharp profile. "Spring, little brother, means sowing-time. Sowing time means repression. Repression means no wheat in August, no bread in December. We have all the luck."

And Rodion, continuing his own thought, replies inconsequentially:

". . . After the shock brigades they'll have to think up something new to make people work. Look at that plain. There used to be roads. See, over there, and over there, too, toward Bear's Woods. There ain't any more roads 'cause there ain't any more carts 'cause there ain't any more horses."

Two lads. They're wearing sheepskins—one grey the other brown—and old caps with ear-flaps plastered over their skulls. They have a way of looking at you with a tranquil mocking expression. Their cocky air makes them seem different right off from all the others in town. We're proletarians, see! Also we're under the special patronage of You-Know-Who. So we have the right to think a little. We're paying for it. And the right to speak, since we're already deportees—and not the kind who repent, who approve of everything, who say polite thank-yous when the boys from Security tickle them in the butt with a boot-toe. We're the only free men on socialist soil—fresh out of jail and ready to go back in, required to register every five days, provided with administrative papers like this one:

Does not take the place
of a Residency Permit

USSR
RSFSR
State Political Administration (GPU)
Delegation for Chernoe

Certificate issued to Citizen ..... deported by administrative action by virtue of a decision of the Special Board of the State Security Dept. Required to appear every five days at the office of the commander. Forbidden to exceed the town limits by more than five hundred metres. Signed: The Delegate of the SSD, the Secretary.

(Seal, date, order number in red ink.)

The worst is getting by without galoshes when the snows are melting; and getting by without eating when you're hungry at night.

"Didya' ever notice, Rodion, how hungry you get in the Spring?"

The forest line grows darker at the horizon. A little over two centuries ago, peasants fleeing serfdom built this little town on the bluff overlooking the river bend. They thought they had gone far enough into the inclement

North to be forgotten. They were only half right, but what could they do? However far you flee, your grandchildren will have to flee one day in their turn.

From the Embankment of the Revolution (but there is no embankment in reality: there is only a vague abandoned road, its surface abruptly broken by outcroppings of black stone, running along the bluff, one hundred metres above the river), you can see the lines of plains and woods rising like a sea for fifty kilometres around: no sign, no habitation, no fire at night. At night there are no lights showing except in the sky, but during the great thaws or on marvellous summer evenings all shimmering with a universal caress, the stars shine with a supernatural brilliance which heightens your taste for living.

Chernoe means Black-Town and Chernaya, Black-Waters. The river gets its name—despite the energy of its rapid, slightly turbulent waves endlessly rolling scraps of sky—from its floor of dark pebbles, visible from close up through the clear water. Under the town there are more outcroppings of black stone broken off by some geological catastrophe. Thus revolutions shape the earth, burying, crushing whole forests rustling with birds. They tell a story about the founder of the town, Seraphim Bezzemelny (Seraphim Lack-Land), who fled un-belief even more than servitude. When he arrived on this bluff with Nadiezhda, his wife, and their sons, their daughters-in-law, their grand-children, he cried: "Praise Thee, Lord! Thy Will is done! On these black stones we will build our house. On these black stones we will eat our black bread of the time of Antichrist." Earlier, in a dream, he had seen himself seated on a peak overlooking the empty North and he had foreseen his death and he had said: "Remove not this cup from me, for I want to bear witness to my faith." The Lord heard that prayer. It's the only one he hears for certain over the centuries in this land of the Russias where everyone drinks his bitter cup—never doubt it—down to the last drop. And it's not over yet.

Tall houses built of tree-trunks rose out of the rock. Pale golden wheat rustled in August. The bare feet of young women carrying kegs of limpid water from the Chernaya twice daily, bodies braced under the yoke, cut a twisting path into the grass, the earth, even the rock. They still follow it two

hundred years later. In the summer sun, children with gleaming bodies dive into the Chernaya, drunk with chill and daring, for there are treacherous whirlpools which every year suddenly carry some bold tousled head down to fatal depths. They find the little bodies three kilometres downstream on a sandbar where they seem to be sleeping desperately, washed and bruised in an unreal blue light. In the days when the town was founded, it enjoyed ten years of peace. Then the great heresiarch was burned at Pustozersky (Desert-of-Lakes), at the limit of the Nordic world. The great persecuting Patriarch died persecuted, and his remains, transported on a boat, descended another river amid the prayers and sobs of the people.

Seraphim Lack-Land prayed for that man of faith who had attacked the Faith, divided the Church, and betrayed, banished, hunted, insulted the true faithful. A new Patriarch, organizing his grudges along with his administration, remembered Seraphim, had him brought to the Kremlin, offered him bread, salt and forgiveness with Christian unction and told him: "Repent, Seraphim, and your sins will be forgiven and I will bless you." Seraphim cried out: "Repent, yourself, or be silent, shameless servant of the Evil One!" They chained Seraphim in the cellar of the Monastery of the Trinity. Winter was eternal there. He could hear the bells of the false faith ringing. But he needed only to close his eyes to see the pacifying Holy Face. Then, shivering, his teeth chattering, but his will stretched to the limits of strength, he would repeat: "Lord, I will never deny Thee, I will never deny Thee, I will never deny Thy people." He died there, after years of obstinacy, tormented by nostalgia for the open spaces and for the children of his children. They sometimes tell the story of his life, with many other details, on long winter evenings.

These tales inspire Tikhon, the disabled pensioner, who fought through the whole Ural campaign under Blücher in 1918, and he in turn tells of battles, of captures, of how he was shot on the bank of the Bielaya (The White River). The officer told the line of prisoners: "Jews and Communists, three steps forward." Three men stepped out. Tikhon stepped out with them—next to them—a blond lad in ragged clothing. "You're neither a Jew nor a Commissar, you son of a bitch! So you're looking to stop a bullet, eh, you little snot-nose!" they jeered. "I'm for the Commune, your Honour."

said Tikhon, who didn't exactly know what it was and whose guts were shrieking with fear. Fear saved him by toppling him into the ravine a hundredth of a second before the bullets would have hit him. Now he's the one who sells cigarettes—when there are any—in the booth of the Regional Union of Co-ops *(Ray-Koop-Soyouz)* on the market square. You still find significant names among the population. There's a Seraphim Seraphimovich, a woman named Nadiezhda Seraphimovna who sells salted cucumbers, a Liubov Seraphimovna who is a Party member. The Secretary of the Soviet is named Avvakum Nestorovich.

Between Seraphim and Tikhon two centuries empty of history passed over Chernoe, Black-Town, Black-Waters. The Zyrians besieged the town at the beginning of the XVIIIth Century. They shot reed arrows tipped with fish-bones. (But maybe they weren't Zyrians). The town burned down every thirty years more or less, so that the generations have succeeded each other there from one fire to the next and all its improvements are connected with great calamities. The Revolution happened all by itself. Once the police chief had taken flight, a political deportee assembled the doctor, the agronomist, the vet, some school-teachers, some fishery-workers, a carter and a postal-clerk, and explained to them that henceforth they formed the Provisional Self-Administration Committee of the town and the district. The agronomist, Babulin, a thick-set man with a low forehead, said: "I understand. *Res-publica*, the public thing. That's marvellous. What are we going to do?" The postal-clerk suggested composing a message to the provisional government of Prince Lvov; the doctor, ordering the vaccination of the school children.

* * *

The great storm, centuries in preparation, began with total simplicity. Where are the actors of those bygone days and who remembers them? Each year's thaw renews the earth. The political deportee, a Social-Revolutionary it seems, unless he was a Populist, a Maximalist or something else, was named Lebedkin. He had long been a well-known figure, dressed in his dark, fur-lined cloak in winter and in white peasant blouses belted with a

silk cord in summer, with his stringy beard and his half-joking half-professorial way of talking. He had been rereading the same books since his youth—Buckle, Lavrov, Mikhailovsky—and probably rethinking the same ideas. He was not in the least surprised, as he unrolled a spool of telegrams brought by his friend the postman one morning in his twelfth year of deportation, suddenly to discover that it had all happened. "Well," he said as he tightened his *pince-nez* glasses on the bridge of his nose, "we've won." And he added, with a dreamy air: "Now Little Mother Russia is going to pay the piper."

A few nights later he received a singular visit. Someone tapped softly on the shutters at the very moment when, stretched out on his sofa, he was about to blow out the lamp. Lebedkin, wrapped in an ancient dressing-gown, opened the window, pushed aside one shutter, and discovered in the shadows a harsh face framed by the long ear-flaps of a fur cap. Broad nose, tiny slanted eyes. "You're the mayor now," said the man in a low voice, "so I've got to talk to you, Ivan Vassilich." Lebedkin leaned his elbow on the windowsill, for the May night was nearly warm; the constellations reigned over a silence of vertiginous sweetness. "I'm listening, comrade."

"I am nothing," said the man. "I am nobody. But I understand many things. I'm a fisherman from the lower town; my name is Alexei Matiuchenko. That's all the same to you; to me as well. I need money, Ivan Vassilich, to go to Petersburg for the common cause—that's it."

Lebedkin observed that head silhouetted against the Milky Way. "Money?" he said, somewhat puzzled. "And to do what with?"

The man's eyes, which were as large as the largest stars, were right up against his, their breaths mingled. "His throat must be cut," said the man, "and I will cut it, or else it's all a bloody mess and we'll never get anywhere." He had placed his large rough hand on the window-sill, fingers spread apart.

"Who?" asked Lebedkin simply.

"The Tsar, Herod."

Lebedkin was pulling on his goatee with his fingertips. Wasn't he going to stretch out his hand and touch the stars? There was an atmosphere of miracle in that silence. But he merely touched the shoulder of the

fisherman Alexei Matiuchenko and heard himself answer him: "Perhaps you are right, Comrade Alexei, and it would be a good thing for you to go there —although it is a business that will be hard to accomplish. I'm too old, you understand. As for money, I haven't any, brother."

"Then I'll go on foot," said the man. "But I'll get there. As for you, don't say a word."

"Yes," said Lebedkin slowly. "Now it is time to pose the question of power. Of a power the like of which has never been seen, which will have a nameless, bottomless, pitiless and generous strength."

"First pitiless," whispered Matiuchenko, "to cleanse the earth. We will be kind afterwards. There will always be time for that." He seemed to be smiling: "I couldn't be before."

They shook hands. Matiuchenko descended with long strides toward the Black-Waters which gleamed from their eternal abyss close by.

Lebedkin closed the shutters, lay down, covered himself with his fur-lined cloak, hesitated a moment before putting out the lamp, tempted to reread a few stanzas by Nekrassov. He thought only one name in the darkness: Russia, Russia, and it was terrible and sweet, it was like the breathing of someone close, elemental and mysterious, immensely powerful, sleeping there. Lebedkin fell asleep between two dreams which were also two fears. He was thinking of travelling to Petersburg but he didn't dare leave, out of fear of not being able to find anyone there after so many years. Think of it: a year in prison awaiting trial, two in the Orel Central Prison, two at Tobolsk, twelve in deportation . . . Go back to find yourself alone, unknown, out of place, helpless, useless in the whirlpools of the Revolution? Freedom is beautiful in Chernoe too.

He would sometimes sit down to contemplate it in his soul, on a black rock at the summit of the crest overlooking the river and the open spaces, on the very spot where Seraphim Lack-Land used to meditate. The second wish, the second anxiety joined him there too. Will I never again have a shoulder next to my shoulder in life? The sweetness of a body abandoned next to my body at night? He divined that this would never be, never again, that his desolate flesh no longer deserved that great happiness, that his hands would never again dare even to try to grasp it; and, like a child

ticking off pearls, he murmured sweet, tempting names to himself: Tatiana, Galina, Vera, Nadia, Liuba, Irina, Vassilissa . . . No one. The former Karnaoukhov Street, on which the Trade-Union Club and Social Nourishment Restaurant Number I stand, is now called Comrade Lebedkin Street because they found him one morning lying behind a stall at the fishmarket with his skull split open. His brains were spread over the dandelions, but his *pince-nez* glasses, their frame mended with black thread, were still perched on the bridge of his nose.

Heavy, jolting years have passed. Kazatzkaya Street (or Cossak Street) has become Red Army Street; the former Traktirnaya (The Footpath of the Inn) is called The Boulevard of The Soviets; Saint Nicholas Square is Lenin Square; a Marty Street runs alongside the public garden and crosses Clara-Zetkin Street formerly Ivanovskaya. The State Security Department occupies the house of old Ananiev, who exploited the fishermen for a half-century; that same Ananiev was killed in '18 on the doorstep. In '31, one of the worst years, Petrochkin, the instructor of the Godless, had returned from the centre with directives and so the fishermen and the tanners, meeting in joint assembly at the *Comintern* movie-theatre, voted unanimously (nineteen were in attendance) to tear down the church. The Soviet, lacking money, had refused the necessary funds, so the Godless and the Party mobilized workers for a day of voluntary labour. They cleverly put out the rumour that the purpose was to unload the trucks of the Regional Cooperative, which had arrived loaded with manufactured goods. Three hundred volunteers instantly answered the call.

As soon as they were informed that the real purpose was to tear down Saint Nicholas' Church in order to put an end to capitalist, imperialist, and feudal superstition, which is the opium of the people and the hydra of counter-revolution, only twenty-seven of them stayed—the best to be sure, the youth, the most conscious elements, "the flower of the district", as Petrochkin wrote in his report to the Regional Committee. They carried the icons and vestments to the town square in order to burn them, but "an ignorant mob, whipped up by the rich peasants and the interventionist priests, forcibly seized this national property which we were preparing to

destroy in the interest of the workers, which proves that backward prejudices still have deep roots in the consciousness of the non-proletarian and the petty-bourgeois masses of Chernoe, influenced by centuries-old obscurantism . . ." (Petrochkin's Report).

The twenty-seven conscious elements smashed the glass out of the windows, since that was the easiest thing to do, and attempted to demolish the church's blue onion-dome, because a scaffolding placed there for repairs made it easy for them to get at. They only succeeded in smashing a hole in it. The gilded cross, balanced by a heavy counter-weight, tilted to one side but failed to fall. It is still there, hanging over men's destiny, and perhaps it is no longer a cross, but an interrogative X. The smashed dome remains gaping—which is rather inconvenient, since the church has been converted into a warehouse for merchandise belonging to the District Industrial Cooperative, *Ray-Prom-Koop*. (Fortunately, merchandise is rare and quickly distributed.) Empty packing-cases are slowly rotting there now. The wind sweeps into the wounded dome, swirls through the emptiness, and escapes through the narrow windows, filling the building with a continuous murmur which makes the old women cross themselves. "Listen to the evil spirits carrying on their revels . . ."

Across from the church, on a little round grassy knoll, a bronze bust of Lenin has been erected. The pedestal was taken from the bust of Tsar Alexander II, presented to the town long ago by the rich Ananiev. It is surrounded by barbed wire as a precaution against vandalism by children. This black bronze seems very tiny in the middle of the huge square, all alone in its grassy circle, surrounded by a vast expanse of trampled earth. Most of the time, the mud makes it impossible to approach. Turning its back to the church, it has three buildings in front of it: The Party Committee, the *Salomé* restaurant-bar, and the Soviet. Security is on its right; on its left the club reserved for militants holding responsible positions and Security men. Such is the heart of the town on the Black-Waters.

Here, between the *Salomé* restaurant-bar and the *Comintern* movie-house, run three hundred metres of wooden sidewalk, illuminated by a few lanterns, on which people stroll in the evening when the weather is fair—so numerous that their voices and footsteps make a sound like a beehive. Here

people meet, love-affairs begin, jealousies are kindled. Here is where the child vendors who sell cigarettes one at a time prowl, with their razors ready to slash the pockets of the representative of the regional cooperative who arrived this very morning. The young men follow the young women who, walking arm-in-arm, take up the whole width of the soft planks, and one of them will always turn around—shoulders held high, her profile standing out, unique in this world—to answer one of the lads. Here pass Elkin, Ryzhik, Avelii, Rodion, Varvara Platonovna, separate and united, prodigiously free and miserably captive, each following the path of his faith, a rather rough path. Four men, one woman, five threats to the regime. Five files. Five little circles enclosing names and numbers on the vast (and secret) coded map of deportation centres for counter-revolutionary Communist oppositionists of the Left, the Far Left, and the Right, as well as the unaffiliated and the adaptably orthodox, hanging in a (secret) office in Moscow at the Special Collegium for State Security, linked by direct (secret) line to the Kremlin, by direct (secret) line to the General Secretary's desk, in short by direct line to the (secret) laboratory of history.

* * *

Elkin made that journey twice a day. He worked at the State Fish Trust, *Gos-Ryb-Trust*, working out plans for catches, storage, distribution of raw materials, etc., for the current year, the following year, the next three years, all of this according to directives from the Regional Centre, the Pan-Soviet Centre, the Central Planning Commission, and the Chief (through the application of his memorable six points establishing the rules for labour training). "I know how many fish are supposed to be caught in five years," he used to say. "Alas, nobody knows how many will be caught." The Trust occupied a long, narrow suite of rooms inundated by the ceaseless crackle of typewriters and adding-machines, on the corner of Prison Street over a cooperative full of useless neckties and tooth-powder which people used to whitewash the insides of their houses in the spring.

Prison Street keeps its name by an accident composed of a series of omissions or because the truth sometimes emerges without violence despite

the words set up to block it. Ever since a decree of the Regional Centre raised Chernoe to the rank of district capital, the little old prison of former times is no longer adequate to hold the dispossessed former rich peasants, the poor and middle-peasant accomplices of the rich, the petty rural officials who coddled these enemies of socialism, the cheaters, the embezzlers, the . . . So they requisitioned the neighbouring houses, put barbed wire over the windows, placed sentries in front of them—sentries who are most often prisoners themselves, Party members to be sure. All this makes for a discreetly animated street. At the end of it, the sky—for it runs into the road that skirts the bluff. A sky which is almost always crystal: pure, pale, so limpid that it clearly reveals the infinite and makes you yearn for stars in the middle of the day. Across from the prison, in winter as in summer, ageless women sell sunflower-seeds by the glass. People come to talk to the prisoners from the sidewalk. ("Not so loud," says the sentinel, "and not so close, citizens! This here is no club you know." "Yes it is." interjects Elkin as he walks by. "The Club of the Peoples' Will." The sentry, surprised by these strange words, follows him with a worried glance: he walks like somebody important yet his clothes don't indicate anything. Better be careful. "That's enough talking, I tell you, citizeness . . .")

Elkin, blond and well-built, went bare-headed in summer, hair in the wind, the collar of his peasant blouse unbuttoned, wearing cloth slippers which he sewed himself out of old remnants of blankets. As soon as it got cold, he never took off his cavalry-coat (without insignia, naturally), which he had brought back from the Far-Eastern campaign. He strode along, head erect, as if he were always marching into the wind; and whenever he met someone he immediately began joking, with a serious air. Affably, he asked the book-keeper of the Milk Syndicate: "So, that little overdraft of six thousand roubles in expenses is still unaccounted for?" and the other man blinked, transfixed by the idea that actually . . . Then, reassuring himself, answered: "How you do joke, Dimitri Dimitrich. Where I work, it's O.K., everything's in order—go on with you. It's not like at the Artisans' Cooperative."

In front of the portal of the deconsecrated church, in preparation for a celebration, they were setting up a boarding five metres tall on which the

Chief, three times life-size, in a cap and military overcoat, was depicted striding forward as if he were about to step down and rush across the muddy square. "Great!" exclaimed Elkin. "He's getting the hell out at last! And it makes him as happy as it does us." The remark, reported to State Security by Maria Ismailovna (librarian, Party member since 1919, expelled in 1930 on suspicion of sympathizing with the successive oppositions, which she had betrayed one after the other every year for the past eight years)—the remark forced the Security Delegate, the Deputy Delegate, and the Chairman of the Special Committee to deliberate. Arrest Elkin? The note from Moscow recommended "the greatest caution" in dealing with him. Yes, but what exactly does *caution* mean? Hmm, remove the picture? suggested the Deputy Delegate. That could be given a bad interpretation. "Who drew it?" inquired the Delegate. The Special Committee Chairman, embarrassed, answered, "Mochkov . . ."

"Mochkov!" The three men looked at each other, annoyed. Mochkov, cartoonist on *The Red Star* of Taganrog, was serving out a three-year sentence under their auspices for "having attempted to discredit the leaders of the Party and the State through his drawings". The Special Committee Chairman, who was about to add that Mochkov had copied his drawing from a sketch published in the central organ of the Party (which everyone knew), bit his lips. "Arrest Mochkov," decided the Delegate. "Give this artist a little taste of our cellar."

"Yes," interjected the Special Committee Chairman, "I committed an indiscretion." The tongue of the Chairman, a chubby, red-faced fellow whose ample flesh seemed ready to burst his tunic, felt dry in his mouth. What a nasty piece of luck! A big glass of 110-proof brandy to set us to rights again—and quickly! The Delegate's cordial tone of voice restored his salivation:

"Vigilance, Comrade Anissim!"

"Yes, Chief!"

Mochkov had no idea why they kept him from November to February in one of the cellars of Security—from which he emerged crippled with rheumatism. It meant that his sentence would be prolonged for a few more

years, which meant that Niura would no longer wait for him, for that's no life, which meant . . .

The Special Committee of State Security nonetheless summoned Elkin, and it was on a very cold day. He entered with no more than a nod by way of greeting, made a sort of leap for the heating-stove, stretched his hands over it, shook his shoulders and seemed to straighten up even taller. "The Devil take you," he said gaily, "with your thirty degrees of frost. Better pray to your little god for little atheists that the Opposition doesn't take power soon or I'll teach you guys what real cold is." He knew from experience that this threat still had a certain effectiveness, albeit one which decreased with the years. The Special Committee Chairman, upset because he hadn't understood well, murmured: "I don't in the least appreciate your jokes, Citizen Elkin," to which Elkin boomed back in a joyful voice, at once exasperating and disarming: "Tell me, do you think I appreciate *yours*, esteemed citizens?" This outburst was followed by some murky phrases muttered to himself. The Special Committee Chairman thought he made out something like "Gang of feather-covered Devils . . ." but it couldn't be that. That would have been such incredible insolence that it would have been necessary to raise the question of arresting him this very evening. But there, now he was smiling, politely. They never got anything out of him. A character, that. And then, after all, the ex-President of the Kiev Cheka.

Elkin lived in the last house on the road. The walls of his room were bare logs; his window looked out onto the expansive plains, a streak of black water, sky. The room, darkened by the colour of the old wood, had a low ceiling and the light entered it brutally, sadly. When alone, Elkin would age suddenly, frown, and, before sitting or lying down, pace from one corner to the other, hands clasped behind his back. Emptiness. Stone. Space. Heaviness. Do you think you understand these words? Elkin monologued in a crushing silence. There's nothing—and it weighs tons. Draw a straight line from here, in front of you: nothing for a thousand kilometres, nothing for two thousand, for three thousand, for four thousand, nothing at the Pole. You'd have to go down to the other side of the globe, through Labrador, to find more idiots (who are more or less happy, thanks to scientific wheat-farming; but they're hurting right now on account of the

decline of the price in the world market). The people here . . . His lips curled in disgust. Until they clear the earth of these god-forsaken burghs—or throw in electricity, daily newspapers, aeroplanes, cars, an abundance of gaiety and zest for living—they will be bipeds, not men. He halted in front of the bare panes, beyond which the spring sky was turning slightly pink. And tomorrow? The irresistible pressure of one hundred and forty million peasants, can you conceive that? If the West doesn't start moving, that rising tide in five years, ten years, fifteen years, twenty years, will carry everything away. Socialism? They don't give a damn. They only know its lying face, its face of inhumanity and anti-socialism. Nothing will remain of our ashes. A cheerful thought.

His tablecloth was a newspaper. He laid out bread, salted cucumbers, butter. He worked the portable stove on the window-sill in order to stand in front of the expanse. The tin kettle purred. Outside, cows were passing by. A little girl ran from one to the other spurring their indolent progress. All at once three water-carriers came along the edge of the crest, three young women shouldering yokes, swinging the old wooden casks in rhythm with each step. Elkin heard them talking back and forth in loud voices. The last in line appeared to stand still for a very brief moment at the entrance of the path, a dark silhouette, erect, almost glowing against a background of empty sky: Galia. Elkin was staring at her so intensely that she was tempted to turn around. He was waiting for this movement, calling it forth. She did not make it, because of the yoke. She didn't know why she held herself so straight, so proudly, as she descended the steep path, why the purplish-blue line of woods against the evening sky seemed enticing, vaguely poignant to her.

Elkin felt cold. There is a being on the earth from whom one waits for a gesture, less than a gesture, a glance, and who refuses it, without knowing. And all at once there is emptiness. The great strength we possess seems useless. Something within it is drained, for at the bottom of all strength there is apprehension. Elkin drank his flavourless tea while pacing from one corner to the other, a hunk of bread in his fist. At times he stopped at the table to rearrange some newspaper clippings, marked in red and blue, with his fingertip. Yield of arable land by acre . . . Canada . . . Australia . . .

Denmark . . . the Ukraine . . . Black Lands . . . Western Siberia . . . Years . . . Gross figures and percentages . . .

At bottom, everything is contained in that.

* * *

On the other side of the river, snow still remained in hollow places among the rocks. The shrubs were turning green, a hue so undecided and light that you might have called it a glimmer of sunlight shining through the burgeoning shoots.

"I'm telling you it's yellow and not green," affirmed Avelii, "but since you're used to thinking that bushes are supposed to be green, you no longer really see them. If you were a painter, you'd have a mighty big Right Deviation in your eye." He was talking to Rodion as they both made their way along the bare rock between the bare trees, the sky, and the water. Rodion replied: "Don't rely on your eyes. They don't think." Sometimes Rodion said intelligent things without really knowing it.

Avelii, a Georgian from Megrelia with perfectly-drawn features whitened by the North, a young, well-modulated voice which rang clear. "Eyes," he said gaily, "eyes don't need to think. They grasp and understand without it. I don't like thinking, brother, I like seeing and touching. I'm breathing in this freshness. I don't want anything more . . ." He stretched his neck and sniffed, smiling at everything.

Rodion looked at him sidewise, lowered his heavy forehead, a sad, hesitant little laugh in the depths of his eyes. Rodion: an unattractive face lit up by sea-green pupils. "Breathe all you like, comrade, that won't teach you the sense of things." Under his wolf-skin cap, his head was tortured by questions. He tried to find answers to them in books, but they prevented him from reading. His anxiety blurred the printed lines, henceforth unintelligible and useless. On one point, he saw clearly, and that was in his discussions with Elkin, on the river-bank, about State Capitalism, "a sort of enormous tank, old man, covering the whole horizon, which is going to crush everything."

Avelii: student at the Industrial College of Baku, member of the youth organization, compromised for having questioned a lesson on Party history about the first divergences between the majority and the minority in 1904. Note in his file: "By his insidious questions attempted to discredit the leaders of the Party among the students." Rodion: truck driver at the Penza bicycle factory compromised for having questioned the inequality of wages. Note in his file: "Pernicious agitator, dangerous demagogue, Trotskyist. Knows how to make the masses listen to him." Because it happened that he couldn't sleep for a whole long evening, his brain churning with statistics and ideas more difficult to steer than the heaviest trucks. And the next day, at the Party meeting, he reached into his tunic pocket and pulled out newspaper clippings in the margins of which he had scribbled equations in pencil. "Here, comrades, is the equation for the life of a worker in our factory: I call labour-time *h*, wages *w*, rent *r*, and I say that . . ."

At first they listened to him with indulgence, then with boredom. But his thinking made a breach in the general torpor, his voice grew passionate, his *x's* suddenly transformed themselves into kilos of bread and meat, into roubles and kopecks, and they saw him, swaying from side to side, standing on a platform draped with red calico in front of a puny little black bust of Lenin, a stubborn kid with his head pulled into his neck, who was demonstrating by algebra, by Marx, by Lenin, by the day-before-yesterday's *Pravda*, by Stalin's own six points, that "the worker in our factory is hungry, dear comrades, and that's the problem of problems—it's the very meaning of life. Hegel said . . ."

He stopped short, unable to recapture the idea which had come to him out of the heap of words in a pamphlet on Hegel. "Hegel said: the worker in our factory can't live on wages like these, that's all." His face beamed with satisfaction while the Party activists, following each other to the platform at a signal from the cell secretary, called him a demagogue, a careerist, an egotist who thought only of filling his belly, a Trotskyite, and a panic-monger. The truth was buzzing inside his skull; he didn't understand a word of the arguments they were assaulting him with. Only at the end of the meeting, amid the scraping of benches, did he stand up to say loudly—and

everybody heard him—with a broad smile, "Talk all you like! You know very well I'm right."

Out in the street—a dismal street of perpetual mud, lined with picket fences which people were tearing down piece by piece each night to keep warm—an old worker put his hand on Rodion's shoulder and, in a friendly voice, said, "You're lost, comrade, that's for sure, but you're right. You're great."

"That's right," said Rodion warmly.

In reality, Rodion had both lost himself and found himself. He came to know the cellars of State Security, new faces, Northern skies. With the first half-pint of alcohol in him, problems appeared clearer, he began to feel intelligent. Then everything got cloudy again, and he felt like splitting wood with an axe, like he used to when he lived at home; or like grabbing young birch-trees in both hands to break them, uproot them and feel strong and victorious in the end. Then he could be heard to say, alternatively, "I'm nothing but a brute" or "Comrade Gorky is right. It's a fine thing to be a man." During these periods when he crashed, shattered, soared and suffered confusedly, the thing Rodion feared most was meeting up with Comrade Elkin.

They were arriving at the meeting place, a sort of rocky clearing under the slate cliff on the bank of the Black-Waters. It was a good spot, for you could see the approaching paths without being seen. A clump of birches filled a whole piece of universe there. The trees were waking back to life, their thin trunks all covered with silver whiteness and coolness. The sky filled their tracery of branches: the inescapable sky which cast its blue hues over the rock and over the dark, clear waters. Between the rock and the trees appeared a head, white mane blowing in the breeze. Avelii shouted: "Greetings, Ryzhik!" And the man, whose face was clean-shaven and wrinkled, raised his voice a little to reply. "The springtime, comrades! It's magnificent." He was talking with Elkin, who was seated comfortably on the stone, his cap skewed sideways over his temple: "An invention of the pre-industrial ages," said Elkin in that solemn voice he liked to use when he made outlandish statements. "Doubtless you will explain it in terms of natural economy."

"On the Yenisey," said Ryzhik, "it was even more beautiful than here. The earth seemed to light up from within. Even before the snows had melted the grasses came to life and light filtered into the tiniest twig, the tiniest streamlet. You walked on light. The flowers burst out of the ground overnight. Those flowers have cool, light colours. Only the stars resemble them. You leave the house one morning, you go out onto the plains, straight ahead, for there's nothing anywhere, nothing but the horizon and the same horizon beyond the horizon. You're alone, alone like . . . Ah! I can't really say like whom, like what. Well, like a stone at the bottom of a well, and you don't know what's happening to you. You want to sing, you feel the earth is on a spree. It's something marvellous, unique: anything might happen. That's it, you're going to turn around, just like that, and there right in front of you, in the emptiness, will be a great happiness. What kind? You have no idea, but its possible, that's sure. And you do turn around and you see birds arriving. They're coming through the sky in clouds. They're coming with great flapping wings, and the light is climbing, the stones have a luminous polish, there are flowers, the steppe is singing in silence. Nothing happens to you, of course, but everything is possible."

Elkin said: 'Ryzhik, you missed your calling. You should be turning out octosyllables at three roubles a line. Why did you have to get mixed up in the Revolution? Today, you would be an official of the Pastoral Poets' Division of the Union of Soviet Writers. You would be inundating the gazettes with organized, ideologically correct, and profitable lyricism. Pushkin would turn green with envy on his pedestal."

"Go to Hell. I would never have seen the amazing flowers of the North. And you see, nothing in the world would make me want to cross them out of my life. Around the time when the ice began to break up, the children would go up the hill to keep watch. There was always a whole gang of observant children up there, and they never took their eyes off the river. In the evening they would report on the events of the day: 'the first crevasse has enlarged, a pool has formed on the surface, a new crevasse is starting, you can hear cracking . . .' They reckoned the dates of preceding years, observed the flight of birds. When the cracked ice finally began to move, when the first clear waters opened up, those children would come bounding

down to the houses with shouts of joy. They were carriers of joy. The doors would fling open, people dropped everything: 'It's here!' They brought accordions, and all the young people, boys and girls, set off for the hill to greet the real Spring. We would go there, too, little Nikolkin and I. (Did you know him, little Nikolkin from the Donetz? He had done four years in the isolators; he died in Perm). Nikolkin, who used to say: 'Let me live long enough to see a single socialist prison dynamited, just one. That's all I ask of the permanent revolution." '

A feminine form, swollen by old felt boots, furs, an old cloak, appeared at the turning in the rocks. "Greetings, greetings." Varvara was the last to arrive, for she worked at the fishermen's cooperative distributing four hundred grams of black bread per work-card, salt, rough-cut tobacco, matches, and nothing more. (The promised sugar is two months late, the coupons for it are apparently going to be voided. As for soap, the Regional Centre has been announcing a case of it for seven weeks, let's keep hoping.) The grey fur of her old wolf-skin cap blended with her hair. Yet her face retained a touch of beauty which was almost invisible, superfluous.

Elkin said:

"Comrade Ryzhik's report on the joys of boreal springtime is adopted without debate, unanimously with one abstention: mine. I have ideological reservations. Let's proceed with the agenda. Reports on the Verkhne-Uralsk Isolator, the agrarian question, the United Front in Germany. You have the floor, Varvara."

* * *

"In a few months the Left-Communist Sector of the Verkhne-Uralsk Central Prison has grown from 45 to 96, an increase in strength of more than 100% due to the arrests carried out in the large centres on the eve of the XVIth Anniversary of the October Revolution. On the other hand, the unorganized Party sector has gone up from 8 to 160. These are the orthodox people under suspicion who don't realize what's hit them and still keep on with their stupid platitudes. This twenty-fold increase shows us the rising curve of repression directed against the unstable elements of the

ruling bureaucracy. These two figures, of which the first is the index of the resistance of the conscious proletarian vanguard to the Bonapartist dictatorship and the second that of the accelerated liquidation of the Party, together demonstrate . . ."

"What do these figures demonstrate together, that each of us doesn't already know? We live on that knowledge alone, that's the reason we're here, and knowing it has lead us to this slow death. The Revolution is showing a false face which is no longer its own. It is refuting itself, negating itself, cutting us down, killing us. You see it, but can you believe it? We used to feel infallibly victorious. Where's the mistake? Everything we loved is now reduced to a despicable sham. I ask you to weigh the thesis and the antithesis, to think through every word. Be careful not to underrate the dictatorship of the proletariat even if it is sick, if it loses its head, if it is iniquitous."

"Be careful of yourself, comrade, your illusions are quite understandable, but you're getting drunk on words. Are we *Enragés*, *Equals*, or proscripts of *Prairial?"*

"Drop your historical analogies, old man: They have nothing to do with Marxism. It's Lenin's 'Who will carry if off' that is the point today; and it's not settled yet.

"In this connection, comrades, I request a three-second recess for Karl's latest revelation (may his revolutionary's soul rest in peace: his body is rotting slowly in the toilet of the General Secretary's office). The 'who will carry it off'—we've known that for a long time. The 'who will carry it off to the grave'—we know that, too. But 'when will *his* turn come?' That's what we don't know . . ."

". . . The Left-Communist sector of the prison has established fraternal ties with the Anarchists, who joined them during last year's second hunger strike and this year's first. The June strike was lost through a miscalculation. Scurvy had been rife during the winter; they should have taken the weakness brought on by the terrible cold into consideration. Several comrades were very ill by the seventh day. The strike committee proposed calling off the strike on their own responsibility, but they themselves were removed that night by surprise and taken off to the detention centre."

"Removed? Why didn't they resist?"

"Summoned separately to the prison office for negotiations around two in the morning, assaulted in the corridor, gagged, bound, kidnapped, what . . . The second committee, set up the following day, was unable to assume its functions because it was sequestered in a distant building and kept under surveillance. At six in the evening the commandant of the prison received telegraphed orders to resort to forced feeding. Old Kikvadze resisted. They sent to the madhouse for a strait-jacket to control him. His lips were in shreds from the food-pipe. He finally fainted, so that they couldn't feed him. The other sick people decided to resist by force. Then a character from Moscow arrived, sent by the Special Collegium, who asked to meet with delegates.

" 'The Special Collegium of the State Political Administration,' he says 'has decided at this time to refrain from increasing by administrative sanction the sentences of prisoners who have served their terms. Your demands are satisfied, your strike is thus pointless.'

"The comrades answer him: 'You're giving in today because you're afraid of our deaths. We don't believe a word out of your mouth. We got your number a long time ago. What guarantees will you give us for the future?' He was a real bastard, decorated with three Orders of the Red Flag won in the offices of concentration camps. He puts on a dignified expression and: 'The dictatorship of the proletariat keeps its hands free.'

" 'That's a fact,' says Grisha, who was swimming in slow exasperation, 'and here's the proof!' With that he gives him a slap in the face but stumbles (you don't hand out slaps very well on the ninth day of a hunger-strike) and misses him—luckily, for it would have caused us a fresh lot of trouble.

"The sick were extremely low. Four barracks declared an immediate end to the strike. The Far Left put out a protest bulletin in order to link this 'shameful surrender' to 'centrist hesitations.' The Left decided to form an organizing committee responsible for the preparation of a general movement to continue to the end at any price. The strike strategy shows the necessity for simultaneous actions in all the prisons, but it will take at least a year to perfect, if it can be managed. A young mechanic from Tver (an ex-member of the Worker's Opposition won over to Trotskyism who then

joined the Democratic Centralist group—I can't recall his name) refused to recognize the decision that was taken, continued the strike on his own for several days, then tried to slash his wrists. What became of him? I don't have any idea . . ."

"When all is said and done, it's always the same story, for years now: only the dates and names change. Do you remember Tobolsk Central Prison, Ryzhik? Do you remember the Ufa Prison, Elkin?"

"Those were blessed days. I had promised the warden to have him made Director of all the Sanatoria in Crimea. He let my mail through and brought me brandy. There's one fellow whom History cheated . . ."

Varvara's face has become flushed as she speaks. She tosses her fur cap onto the rock, unbuttons the front of her heavy tunic, almost young now, a slender neck, the narrow head of a Mongolian shepherdess, with short, glossy hair. Ryzhik is looking at her in profile. Woman. Severe. Closed. Worn out. Tempting to go off together, together . . . And then he shrugs his shoulders imperceptibly: it will be a miracle if they don't lock me up before the year is out. She is speaking with assurance, without wasting words: ex-student at Sverdlov Communist University, ex-secretary of the factory cell at the Trekhgorka textile plant, ex-political-educator-lecturer at tractor stations in the Northern Caucasus, ex-instructor organizer of agricultural collectives in the Novocherkask district, ex-editor of the *Leninist Voice*, organ of the Workers' Federation produced by the Leninist contingent in a central prison.

As they listen to her, each is following his own train of thought. The pure, glacial waters of the Chernaya flow endlessly, silently, coming down this way from the wooded uplands of the Urals ever since the continent took its present configuration. Avelii is watching the rare wisps of cloud float slowly by in the blue above the birches. Avelii smiles at them. Here are these clouds, this sky, and him; and nothing comes between him and the universe, not even prisons. And, as clearly visible as these clouds, truth, proletarian duty.

Rodion is prodding the stone with the tip of his boot, seeing nothing but the stone. For him all reality has that same grey hardness. Or he looks up at Varvara, the better to grasp what she is saying. What's the point of all this discussion? The counter-revolution is victorious. The time has come to form a new party; for a new struggle which will be long, stifling, bloody—in which we will all perish. Rodion sees so clearly that it makes him wince. we should escape, forge some passports, set up underground printing-presses—begin anew . . . Rodion's lips move silently with his thoughts, but he doesn't dare stand up to speak the decisive words he should be shouting. At night a comet appears, climbs to the zenith, vanishes: thus certainty within him. The outlines of the idea, sharp and clear the instant before, fade, grow cloudy—where are they? Ah! They are problems. Rodion is good for nothing. He is nothing but weakness, self-doubt, doubt about everything.

An argument begins between Elkin and Ryzhik over the <u>united front in Germany.</u> Thaelman, the German C. P. leader, predicting the seizure of power, rejects all compromise with the social-democratic leaders, the social-chauvinists, social-patriots, social-traitors, social-fascists who murdered Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht. "We will form the united front with the social-democratic workers who are revolted by the turpitudes of their leaders. We will triumph. We will turn the Nazi plebiscite against the social-fascist government of Herr Otto Braun into a <u>red plebiscite!</u> The votes of the Nazis will be swamped by those of the proletariat!"

Ryzhik says: "I read that. It reeks of defeat. The *apparatchiks* have become so spineless that they probably believe a third of a quarter of what they say. You'll see that tomorrow they'll be made to say exactly the opposite, when it's too late. You'll see: they'll call for popular governments, broad fronts, from top to bottom, with <u>Scheidemann, with Noske</u> if he's willing, with the worst scum who scuttled the German Republic. You'll see. But only when Hitler throws them all together in the same concentration camps." Ryzhik hesitates to draw conclusions. After all to hold out a hand to Severing! To Grzezinski, the Alexanderplatz butcher! Wouldn't we be playing a fool's game in which we would lose everything? Wouldn't it be preferable to be beaten without being contaminated, without dishonour?

"Say, do you think the hands of today's IIIrd International are clean of workers' blood? Just between ourselves, my friend, I think that Neumann, back from Canton where he led thousands of coolies to the slaughter, or Manuilsky, the Central Committee delegate who shot Yakov Blumkin and is quietly exterminating us, or Kolarov and Dimitrov, responsible for the slaughters in Sofia, can certainly shake hands with Noske and with *Polizeipräsidents* accustomed to ordering their men to club the unemployed. You'll tell me that the working class hasn't got much to gain from their handshakes—but maybe you're wrong. Since, after all, the working class has faith in them! Since it cannot, has not, learned to do without them!"

Elkin went on:

"The Old Man's theses are correct—the only chance for salvation is a common front with Social Democracy and the Reformist trade-unions. It's madness to expect to win the masses away from their leaders, when the proletarian spirit has become stabilized within the old parties. And when you yourselves are hardly much better than the people you're denouncing! . . . There are still some imbeciles who say that Hitler should be allowed to take power, for he'll use himself up rapidly, go bankrupt, dissatisfy everybody, open the way for us . . . The Old Man is right on another point. The time to fight to the death is before he takes over. Once Hitler has power, he will keep it. We know the way. And our goose will be cooked for a long time: as a result, the bureaucratic reaction in the USSR would probably be stabilized for ten years.

"There are singular congruencies between the two dictatorships. Stalin gave Hitler his strength by driving the middle classes away from Communism with the nightmare of forced collectivization, famine, and terror against the technicians. Hitler, by making Europe abandon the hope of socialism, will strengthen Stalin. These grave-diggers were born to understand each other. Enemies and brothers. In Germany, one is burying an aborted democracy, the child of an aborted revolution. In Russia, the other is burying a victorious revolution born of a weak proletariat and left on its own by the rest of the world. Both of them are leading those they serve—the bourgeoisie in Germany, the bureaucracy here at home—toward a catastrophe."

"Yes," said Rodion brightly, aglow with the joy of understanding.

Varvara suggests writing up some theses, discussing perspectives . . . "Yes," Rodion agrees again, "you can't live without perspectives." Why does Elkin break out laughing? Rodion feels confused. Avelii, standing, is throwing stones into the Chernaya. They curve high into the air against a pale background tinged with saffron pink, shrink to black specks, splash into flowers of spray as they fall. Avelii turns. "I feel like singing," he says. The verses of *The Knight of the Panther-Skin* are humming softly in his chest, for there are evenings like this two thousand nine hundred kilometres from here, on the banks of the Rion, below the forests of Kutais, in the heart of the Georgian hills. "Me too," half-whispers Varvara, who never sings.

* * *

Ryzhik was examining those four faces with almost malevolent attention. He probed their eyes and was so deeply engrossed in introspection that his wrinkles were set in a sort of grimace. An old stone figure bristling with white hair which fluttered in the breeze like a flame over his brow. When they separated, Rodion left alone by the steepest path; Avelii and Varvara followed the bank as far as the boats; Ryzhik, walking alongside of Elkin, suddenly took his arm. "Listen, brother, I'm uneasy. There are five of us—and not one informer! Do you think that's possible? And if its like that, what do you think they're preparing for us, those bastards, with their thirty-six thousand dossiers? After all, they can't have obligingly brought us together on the banks of the Black-Waters without realizing it. It can only be to find a good gimmick and throw us into the soup with a stone around our necks. What do you think?"

Elkin whistled:

"That's what I've been telling myself for a long time."

"So?"

"They all seem to be true."

"The truest," said Ryzhik, "can be broken. They plunge them into muddy water, they twist them and wring them out, and some of them are no better

than dishrags after that."

"We know that."

The landscape was vanishing, yet the rocks were tinged with lilac and, climbing the hill, they had the whole bend of the Chernaya at their feet, its surface of ink and sky spread out in the middle of the darkened spaces. "Naturally," continued Elkin, "but after all, that won't happen either to you or to me."

Then to whom? "Who drinks?" inquired Ryzhik.

"Everyone, except perhaps Varvara. You, first of all."

Ryzhik ran his hand through his hair. "The devil take us!"

"So come on in," said Elkin. "I've got half a bottle left."

Night clung to the window-panes, which were broken and plastered over with paper. A woman was rocking a child to sleep in the cellar, just below. Her voice came out like a moan. Elkin lit the kerosene lamp, which gave no more light than a night-light. Its glass chimney was chipped and black with soot around the top. They sat down at the table, face to face, with the sooty light between them. Elkin filled two tall glasses with alcohol. For a moment they were silent—congealed, hardened, aged. Their faces stood out for each other with a sadness from which there is no escape. Then Elkin stifled a laugh. "Wait a moment," he said. He went over to the pile of books and newspapers that occupied one corner of the room, next to a sack of potatoes, and got a hard-bound book. "Take a look!"

Ryzhik's face lit up with amazement. "Oh my God!" The author's name had been carefully scraped off the cover, on which a red star burst forth.

"I bought it in the market-place at Tiumen last year while I was being transferred, old man. I was passing through, accompanied by a rather decent bugger from the Special Battalions. I stopped short in front of an old woman who was selling this along with a pile of junk. I had it for a rouble, she didn't know what it was. 'You can barely use this paper for smoking,' I told her." They turned the first pages together smiling. Leon Davidovich Trotsky's portrait looked right back at them: intelligence and energy were stamped across the forehead; *pince-nez* glasses; a definitive flash in the eyes.

"It's a good likeness," said Ryzhik. It made them forget the alcohol. Ryzhik frowned: "The main thing, you see, is that they don't kill him!"

Elkin at first nodded his acquiescence; then, springing to his feet, flung out in a triumphant voice: "I'm sure they won't kill him!" and tossed off his glass of brandy in a single gulp. It was like drinking fire. Three cheers for fire! The room expanded into the immensity of the night. The tiny flame under the smoky glass was startling.

Ryzhik opened the book at random. "Listen," he said.

But of what matter now the rhythm of that bygone language, the precision and ardour of that thought, bound to events in order to force them, ceaselessly invoking history in order to make it? The old text lives because it expresses a fidelity, a necessity. It is necessary that someone not betray. Many may weaken, retract, fail themselves, betray. Nothing is lost if one man remains erect. Everything is saved if he is the greatest. This man has never yielded, will never yield, either to intrigue or to fear, to admiration or to slander, even to fatigue. Nothing will separate him from the Revolution—victorious or defeated, covering crowds with songs and red flags, heaping its dead in common graves to the sound of funeral hymns, or preserved in the hearts of a handful of men in snow-covered prisons. And if after that he is wrong, if he is intractable and imperious, it hardly matters. The essential thing is to remain true.

The chain on the double doors rattled in the dark vestibule. "It's nothing," said Elkin bringing his face up close to Ryzhik's—and Ryzhik saw his pupils dilate with joy. "It's Galia, a creature as pure as the steppes, as your flowers of the North, as . . . Ah!" He shook his head.

"Yes, yes," said Ryzhik averting his eyes.

Galia halted, hesitant, in the semi-darkness near the door—tall and slender, wearing a red kerchief, the end of which was hanging across one cheek against a lock of hair like a dark poppy. "Good evening," she said slowly, with a gracious hesitancy.

Ryzhik caught only a glimpse of her; the wrinkles in his face grew stony, he fixed his eyes on the open book in the poor light—the book in which the powerful words of nineteen hundred and eighteen hammered out the

footsteps of fighters: “Red soldier comrades, commanders and commissars! At the hours of greatest danger, on the eve of decisive victory, the Party . . .” Step aside, young woman. The fire of memory and alcohol rose up in his chest. The 6th Division, the 7th Division, the XIIth Army, Turkestan. That was worth living through.

Elkin, both hands on Galia’s shoulders, pushed her gently toward the vestibule, then through the darkness, towards the doorway. She noticed the brandy on his breath, a slight drunkenness in the weight of his hands, which held her with tender strength. He imagined her half-smiling, annoyed that he had drunk. In the low doorway, as she stood one step down from him, her face lighted by the diffused glow of a moonless sky, he bent over her and warmly took her head in his hands. “Go to bed, Galia, Galinochka, dearest darling . . . I have visitors tonight—marvellous, invisible callers who have come from a place so far away I can’t tell you . . .”

“What visitors?” asked Galia under her breath, touched to the heart by jealous anxiety.

“Nothing to fear!” he answered. “They are Ideas . . .” They kissed, very quickly. Galia felt that the man’s lips were dry and burning. As for him the woman’s mouth left him with a sensation of pale coolness. Just before she went through the gate in the fence, four steps away, Galia turned and raised her hand: and the shape of that hand shone in the night with adorable whiteness. “Greetings to your Ideas!” Was she smiling? He should have called her back, not let her go, kept her, kept her! What was stopping him, what heaviness in his legs and his bowels? Elkin felt it tearing him apart. “The whole earth is alone. I’m drunk.” With heavy steps that made the floorboards creak, he went back into his room. Ryzhik hadn’t moved. He stood before the open book, his face lighted from below, the washed-out face of a man who would soon die. The bottle was empty—plague!

“Keep reading,” Elkin told him.

Galia, whose joy abandoned her as soon as she passed through the gate in the enclosure, went around to the other side of the house. She walked quickly, sure-footedly, through the shadows, the knowledge of every bump in the ground implanted in her limbs. Thus, altogether bound to this earth, these rocks, these waters, these skies, borne along by them, by them

delivered from everything and even from herself, walking as she lived, quick and straight, without needing to think in words. At that instant it was necessary, absolutely necessary, for her to see him again: Dimitri. There was a rise in the road almost directly opposite his window. Galia stopped there, attentive, invisible. Elkin's window, dimly lighted, was the only one living in the dense darkness of the houses and yards. The little lamp gave it a yellowish glow, more sad than unreal. Galia was angry with herself for not having cleaned the glass. It was a clear thought and did her good.

Ryzhik was reading something aloud, standing over the lamp, and the book must have been lying on the table. Ryzhik: a high bare forehead bristling with white locks, a strange face, powerful yet wan, in which the grey lashes hid the eyes and only the lips were moving. Galia thought of spells: she felt a vague fear. People believe they are conjuring away misfortune and they call it up. Whether they call it up or conjure it away, misfortune is there. But it must be a spell for virility, for Ryzhik's chest was swelling, hands at his sides, and he seemed taller, strangely commanding. Around him, like dark wings, moved great shadows. Elkin was pacing back and forth, and he occasionally walked around the reader, his hands in his pockets, straightening or raising his brow, his shoulders squared like the shoulders of men preparing for battle. Galia foolishly raised her hand and began to make the sign of the cross over the two men, but she remembered in time that she wasn't a believer, for "the younger generation is not religious, as is well known." Night, emptiness, was everywhere, surrounding these two men. They were alone, absolutely alone. "Dimitri! Mitya!" Galia followed him from one corner of the room to the other, she even thought she met his eyes, but it was really impossible for him to see her, dazzled by his night-lamp, by his ideas. "They are perishing for those ideas," thought Galia. "My God."

In front of her girlfriends, and inside herself, she called him "My Man" with a tinge of pride. And here he was almost no longer hers, in spite of himself, alone with his captive strength, surrounded by incantations, winged shadows, feeble light, total night. He halted at the window, just across from Galia, sharply outlined in the night. "My Man, My Man," she repeated to herself, anxiously. The coldness of the spaces behind her seized

her by the shoulders, in the very place where Dimitri had touched her. She shuddered. What's the matter with me? Dimitri, Mitya, don't be afraid of all this emptiness, I'm here. Hmm, I'll go wash my blouse for my day off, for you. Galia went running downhill toward Blacksmiths' Street, where there were no longer any smithies or blacksmiths, a street which huddled half-way down the hill under the debris of a rockslide. She lived there, with her sisters, their husbands, and their brood, in a vast cellar cut right into the rock.

* * *

Rodion was at work by eight in the morning in one of the side-stalls of the market-place under the sign of the Tinsmiths' Artisanal Cooperative. With his shears he cut into the old iron, turned dark grey, even black with the years, for they had received their last sheets of real tin years ago, before industrialization. He soldered new bottoms into old cans, and, of the four guildsmen, none was more expert in the art of diagnosing the ills of old portable stoves. So much so that the women of the lower town would entrust their pre-war Primus-stoves only to him. Rodion loved this work, all work, as a class-conscious proletarian should love it. This put him at odds with his mates, local folk and rather backward, for whom it was above all a question of accumulating roubles, even if this meant palming off such mediocre work on their clientele that Rodion was ashamed for them. Then he would try to explain to them that "technology is the liberation of man."

"There are motors . . ." he began enthusiastically, but he didn't know exactly what motors, only that they existed, simply marvellous ones, ready to liberate men . . .

"Shut up," yelled a smut-grimed devil. "A plague on your motors. It's because they don't want to produce anything anymore but machines that there's no more bread. Men will end up starving under machines, for sure. And as for you, you'd do better to learn how to make love."

Furious laughter shook the stall, plunging Rodion into confusion. The fact is that he didn't know how to dance or to woo the girls on the Ivanskaya who laughingly toss peppery quatrains in your face—or how to

get himself to ask them for the least of their favours. The girls he had walked to the Marat Garden, while talking about "the fundamental transformation of relations between the sexes" had found him duller than most agitators. Only one expressed interest in an important subject, and that was to ask him: "You're educated, Rodion, so explain to me what a jazz is? People are talking about it . . ." Rodion didn't know. Rodion asked Ryzhik, who didn't know either, then Elkin, who put on his most mocking expression and proclaimed:

"Technique of Negro music exploited by the bourgeois decadence of the music-hall"—which could only be a joke.

Rodion knew the torment of thinking—he never stopped thinking. As he re-tinned cooking-pots his lips murmured: "The iron law of wages . . ." He had more ideas than he had words; he muddled, confused, and jumbled formulas and texts, never sure if it was Engels or Lenin who had said a certain thing, aghast and bewildered by it, discovering glimmers of light in it, tripping into its pitfalls, trying to grasp the mist. Obsessed by problems, and above all by the problem of the worker. Without a commodity-equivalent for real wages, without a full wage corresponding to the actual product of labour, minus a necessary quantity set aside for the expansion of production, there is no socialism: therefore . . .

Here, Rodion felt the strength that comes from grasping a truth, but how to tie it in with the dialectic of history, the period of transition, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the degeneration of the Party, the dictatorship of the Georgian over an exhausted proletariat? How to explain, by the abolition of the exploitation of man by man, the law of August 7, 1932, made for shooting starving peasants, since socialist and cooperative property is sacred and the workers are thus the owners of everything—everything—even and including the grain they steal to keep from starving to death, and the bullet fired into the backs of their necks because they stole their own wheat? What connection between all of this and the plan of *Go-El-Ro* (State Electrification) which is nevertheless being carried out? For Lenin said: "Socialism equals Soviet power plus electrification"—and we have electrification: the Volkhovstroy, Shatura, Kashira, the Zagess, the Dnieprostroy, the most powerful turbines in the world. We have power—

it's still the dictatorship of the proletariat, however sick it may be—but we don't have electric light bulbs in the big centres, no kerosene, no candles in Chernoe. We no longer have Soviets, we don't have socialism because . . . Is the bureaucracy a class? A subclass? A caste? A corrupted element of the conscious proletarian vanguard? A fraction of the middle classes? The involuntary instrument of international capitalism? Is it . . .

People who understand don't know how happy they are, how bitter it is to live without really understanding, feeling your way, half-blind. And how to serve the workers' cause then? How? For thirty roubles a month, Rodion rented a corner with a mattress on some planks, at the Kurochkins', who lived—the four of them—in a low room under fishing-nets, strings of dried fish, and odd objects hanging from smoke-blackened beams. Rodion came home one evening, sat down in the corner, and opened a metropolitan newspaper in which Kaganovich, a Politburo member, dealt with the immediate tasks of the shock-brigades in the mines. Kurochkin was once again mending his boots with wooden pegs, which he was pounding into the leather of an old transmission-belt with sharp little hammer blows. The mother was wringing out grey diapers in a tub. Nina was rocking the cradle of the last-born with a rough movement, and the purple-faced baby was crying softly, endlessly, from an unknown hurt.

Rodion thought about the life of a human being—about what is called fate, but does fate exist? Since no doctor would agree to do the abortion for less than forty roubles and the hospital refused to admit the wife of an artisan who worked for himself, this child was born to die, soon probably, or to live, to live in spite of everything, until it saw the dawn of a classless society—where there will be no more poverty. But what will there be, then? What will there be? How to imagine the colour of a life without poverty. Rodion thought the child would die; and the mother thought so too; and the father thought so too ("let him go quickly, at least there'll be one less hapless wretch") and Rodion threw his newspaper onto the bed and went out.

Varvara Platonova received him gladly. It felt nice at her place. A white tea-cloth over the boxes she used as a table, a white cover on the boxes she

used for a bed. In the evening, a candle placed nicely on a saucer. Varvara, with clean hands and worn fingers, exhaling the smoke of her *Tractor* cigarettes through her nostrils. She served Rodion herb-tea, with sweetish cakes she fried herself. "What do you think, comrade," asked Rodion. "Is there such a thing as fate or is it only a word and whatever must happen, happens?" That was not at all what he meant to say, it was more or less the opposite. "No, Varvara Platonova, wait . . ." He corrected himself laboriously, but since Varvara was unable to make out among his confused words the feverish little mask of the Kurochkin's last-born crying its unknown hurt at that moment, she didn't know what to answer him. And he felt for himself pity mixed with anger, gulped down his glass of burning-hot tea, said "Thank you, comrade, I want to go home and work a bit," and left—but where to go?

He wandered over the bluff where the wooden houses, set at intervals, stared out into empty space. Peasants sheltering in the hollows among the rocks had fires going there. Women were dandling infants on their knees. Men with red beards were cooking something in pots hanging from wire tripods. Rodion felt pity for the infants. Why for the infants and not for the mothers? Why for the little ones—and not for the swarthy urchins with worried eyes he met—why? The view of the horizon, which the coming nightfall tinted with mauve, made him feel better, but it didn't last—why, why? He went up Red Army Street (a gloomy street with dilapidated fences) in order to avoid the tavern, and arrived behind the church with its ruined dome. Not too long ago there had been a garden there enclosed by a wrought-iron fence. Now the fence was being used to divide the first women's prison from the third section of the men's prison. The trampled garden was no more than a vacant lot bristling with shrubs and bushes. When the grass grew tall during the hot months, lovers and drunks found a certain charm in that neglect. Rodion would have liked to see order, lines tracing clear paths of obedience and neatness.

Some trucks pulled up on the right, at the bottom of Lenin Square, in front of the Party Committee or State Security—basically the same thing. He shrugged his shoulders—but where to go? His unhandsome face floated a moment over the curtains of the restaurant reserved for responsible

officials: an odour of buttered noodles reminded him that he was hungry. The sentry in front of State Security was eyeing him hostilely from the other sidewalk. Go ahead and look me over, you poor dumb slob, you don't even know what you're doing, you'll probably never know. The sentry gave a short blast on his whistle: no loitering around here. Rodion, chased off, moved away, shoulders drooping. Soldiers on leave, wearing fresh uniforms, walked past him. He heard some girls laughing; an urchin in a big sheepskin which hung down to his feet offered to sell him some cigarettes or, furtively, a glass of vodka: "Just come under the porch across the way."

(Yes, it would be good to take a drink—but he had promised himself, he had promised the comrades . . .) "Beat it, scram!" he grumbled. "Scram yourself, intellectual!" the kid snapped back. Intellectual, me?—if only I knew . . .

In the tavern an accordion was playing; a heavy male voice could be heard over the murmurs in the cavernous hall . . . "*Sing gypsy chorus / weep my guitar / she will never forget* . . ." Who, she? And what is impossible to forget? Are there really things worth never forgetting? Rodion entered like a ship capsizing. Rodion staggered through the groups seated around tables. They thought he was drunk: a waiter took his arm and sat him down unceremoniously. "Beer?" The beer was lousy and expensive. Tomorrow Rodion would go without eating. The singer's voice brought him to the point of total despair. Whom to talk to? He nearly reached out his hand towards his neighbour, but the man had a narrow-minded, brutal expression. "No consciousness," thought Rodion, "but strength and the will to live. And what can he do? What can anyone do for him? Nothing." His neighbour's murky eyes noticed him. "Do you know how to read, citizen?"

"Yes . . ." The neighbour opened his clenched fist over a crumpled paper which he unfolded on the table. "So, tell me, citizen?" He wasn't brutal, just sorrowful, not narrow-minded, just oppressed. The paper certified delivery of a certain quantity of fish to the Regional Fisheries Centre. "There's nothing about a horse in here," said Rodion, annoyed. The boy from the street was tugging on his sleeve. "Just a little bottle," he whispered. "I won't take hardly anything as commission."

"Give it here," said Rodion, relieved. He took the little bottle under the table, paid, hunched over to drink, to drink: warmed, illuminated, reassured, with a mute need to cry, another need to sing along with that drawling voice which was there, present, everywhere, around him, within him, stirring sleigh-bells, shawls, bobbing hair, amazing unreal hands in whirlwinds of soft snow.

Maybe he did sing. Someone pushed him roughly outside, into the darkness. In the distance, flood-lights illuminated the facade of the Security building, the sentry with the whistle. A yellow and red glow fell onto the wooden sidewalk from the windows of the movie-theatre. Nobody. Rodion raised his head, stretched out his arms, fingers spread, at once so heavy and so light under that pure black sky. He fell into some mud, picked himself up, walked a little more, floating along, through the harsh light of the floodlamps, then plunged into the dazzling shadows of the square.

"Rodion!"

That curt voice pulled him out of a sort of warm emptiness. Elkin took him under the arm, dragged him away, puppet following man. Elkin scolded:

"Again? Aren't you ashamed? Right under their windows? You pig! Go sleep it off, but don't smear us with your filth. Go tell them you're with them, we don't want you anymore. Go tell them first thing tomorrow morning, do you hear me? You have no right to discredit us."

Elkin seized Rodion, who was blubbering, and propped him up against the church wall.

"Don't be angry, Dimitri, Comrade Elkin." Rodion stammered through a broad embarrassed grin. "I'm not as drunk as I look, it's these problems . . ." The pressure of the brick against his shoulders and the fact of standing upright gave him some self-assurance. Elkin whistled cuttingly.

"If it happens to you again, we're kicking you out. Do you hear me? We'll boycott you, do you understand?"

Rodion was humming, rocking his head from side to side. He understood nothing until the moment he was slapped hard across the face —and slapped again, again—but at that instant he understood everything. The ground under his feet regained its firmness, the shapes of the buildings

across the square were sharp like the sharp, childish humiliation which made him say softly, without a reflex of resistance, his chin on his chest:

"Enough, Elkin. You're right."

"Come."

They walked side by side, one supporting the other. Rodion at once man and puppet, legs rubbery and head more or less clear. Golden circles glittered around the stars, the ground was hard as stone underfoot, then oddly elastic. A nightlight was burning at the Kurochkins'. The feverish child had fallen asleep. The father was sleeping on the iron-hooped trunk, the mother and the little girl on the bed. The baby's wheezing was sharply audible over the breathing, groans, and snores of the others. Rodion found his corner and collapsed full-length on his mattress, his face in the red cushion. His bruised lower lip was swelling. What to do? Where to find a bit of real clarity? Whom to ask for an answer? How to become—truly—men?

Roosters crowed, a marvellous whiteness filled the dormer-window. Rodion opened his eyes. In the yard, Kurochkin, up since before dawn, was splitting pine logs which he went upstream to fish out of the river at night, risking jail and perhaps worse, for this wood belonged to the State Forest Trust of the North. With each axe-blow the ground reverberated dully. Rodion imagined, in the fresh morning light, the man's compressed movement. Launched by his fist, the powerful bluish blade completed its short arc, the wood opened, drops of sap moistened the grain like an inner dew. Rodion was no longer thinking, no longer suffering. He knew that daylight was spreading—a calm joy which nothing could resist—over the plains, the tundra, the woods in which the last routed shadows were fleeing. There were voices in the yard. Who would come at this hour? Rodion felt neither fear nor surprise. Rather a sort of contentment that there were voices there, close by—friendly voices—for voices are friendly in themselves, when they spring to life out of a unique morning, whatever voices they may be, whatever they may say. But that idea was practically inexpressible.

Kurochkin stuck his head through the half-open door, saw that Rodion was no longer asleep, and said quietly:

"Rodionich, someone has come for you."

Through the night, the dawn, the spaces, all this aerial blue, through the sounds and silences scattered around the world, someone had come . . . Rodion noticed that he had slept without undressing, that his hands were dirty and his boots covered with dried mud. He washed rapidly in the tin basin and, hands clean, eyes rinsed, went outside in a joyous mood. Someone with a thick beard was waiting on the stoop, standing in the middle of the grey fields and the pure white sky. The visitor was carrying several knapsacks hanging from his body by straps and ropes. A bundle lay at his feet. He said:

"Is it you?"

Rodion smiled broadly: "It's me." Rodion recognized the newcomer by his worn face, the shaggy beard under his chin, the deep lines in his cheeks. "Much prison?" he asked.

"Eight months," said the other man. "Moscow, then Perm . . . Mikhail Ivanovich Kostrov, member of the Party since 1917, professor of Hist-Mat (Historical Materialism), Left Opposition; haven't slept all night, got in at two a.m. The transfer cars in this country beggar description."

"Well," said Rodion. "You are welcome, Comrade Kostrov. I've finished sleeping, go to bed. Don't make a noise, the landlady and the kids are still asleep."

Rodion was looking at him intensely and behind him, beyond the thatched roofs of colourless straw, into distances so sharply outlined and so pure they seemed accessible, and even farther off, beyond, into the other world, the inner steppes, sharply illuminated at that moment.

Do you bring me the answers I seek, comrade? The answers I wait for, that I feel I can grasp as soon as the night vanishes? He who knows them should arrive like this, simply, stars forgotten, through the dawn. He who knows them should be like you, heavy with fatigue and conquered pain. In our day he can only come from prison . . .

"You're not hungry?"

"No. They weren't too rotten at Security. They gave me some herring and bread."

"They're not too rotten here," said Rodion. "It's slowly, gently that they tighten the noose around our necks. It's possible to live."

Without exchanging a word, they shared a big half-loaf of rye bread which Kostrov pulled out of a knapsack and which must have weighed three pounds. Rodion went to get some onions: "They're marvellous for preventing scurvy." Then Kostrov moved in. He was so tired he no longer felt his body; but the fresh air of the night and the morning—after the jolting box cars, after Chaos, after the slow burial of solitary, after the nauseating cellars of the little prisons along the way—cleansed him, like a bath, to his very soul. Even the poverty of the shack, with its oppressive human odour, felt good to him: the sight of the feverish child revived a mute tenderness in him. As he took off his quilted fatigue-jacket, like the ones worn by workers building new industries and by Moukden coolies, he was surprised to find himself humming deep inside:

In the heart there remained
one hundred twenty beats
one hundred twenty beats

At that moment his mind was so clear that he smiled through his beard:

"Stay calm, old heart, I still need you."

But as he lay down on Rodion's still-warm mattress, he nonetheless felt embarrassed, disconcerted, thinking of that young hospitable comrade. Why did I lie to him? Shouldn't I have told him right off. "I've given in my submission. Capitulated. I'm nothing but the shadow of a Communist any more, half-comrade half-swine, for I know what I'm doing as well as I know what I think. I'm unworthy of any confidence. Are you still willing to let me sleep on your mattress and share my bread?" Slowly his shoulders squared. Lied? Lied? But it's to *them*, to all those evil-minded inquisitors, that I am lying, that everyone lies, as they lie to themselves in everything they say, everything they do. What truth do I owe them? He was glad he was no longer looking into Rodion's clear eyes.

Rodion was walking down toward the ford, by Fisheries Street. There was nothing along that street but decrepit fences of old ashen-grey planks. Almost as dark as the ground. Not a single colour; but at the bottom of the hill the green grass was springing back to life. How ridiculously weak and vile we are! As vile as the earthworms which an iron heel crushes and which survive, cut in two. But what ardent, buoyant strength can well up in a man's chest! When he reached the bank of the Black-Waters, which flowed limpidly over its bed of pebbles, Rodion lay down on the rocks to drink right out of the stream—deeply. The coolness of the water quenched his whole being.

ВСЯ ВЛАСТЬ СОВѢТАМ
СОЦИАЛИЗМ В ОДНОЙ СТРАНЕ

III. MESSAGES

Every time Engineer Botkin had a questionnaire to fill out (. . . *15. What are your social origins? 16. What did you do before the Revolution? . . . 21. Have you belonged to any political parties? . . . 25. Have you been imprisoned under the Soviet regime?)*, he declared himself "Unaffiliated, sympathizing with the C.P." In private, he was more precise: "strict-ly unaffil-i-ated". His knowledge of foreign languages, his love of mathematics, a penchant for mechanical drawing which went back to his early childhood, the dreary pleasure he took in boring work, even at home, at night, when he forced himself to read the most insipid official speeches without skipping a line—made of him a valued specialist, confident of earning his thousand roubles a month without having to join the party of his sympathies. "And what else does *homo sovieticus* need beyond a thousand roubles a month?" Botkin would settle the question, after a short pause supplied for your meditation: "A subscription to the *Technische Rundschau*." He slept, stretched straight out, next to Lina, love being a precondition for the proper equilibrium of the faculties and Lina being a nice warm girl—almost pretty and agreeably unintelligent—whose presence blended in with the subdued lighting filtering through a lampshade of tender-blue silk. But if he had to choose between the *Technische Rundschau* and Lina, Lina's tepid warmth, Botkin would not have hesitated. He believed in physiology, not in sentiment, and held technology to be "the lever of civilization".

The shock brigades of construction workers at the site of the Stalin Tractor Works in Stalingrad were returning from work, singing in the smoke-clouded dusk, when the Director informed Botkin of an unhoped-for piece of news: a three-month official mission to London, Paris and Berlin by order of the Central Administration for the Construction of Agricultural Machinery, to gather information on new models under construction. "You will receive secret instructions, Vitalii Vitalievich. I congratulate you." Botkin kept all his cool at the price of a suffocating

effort. As soon as he got home, he stretched out on the sofa, unhooked his collar and let his right hand fall to the carpet, totally limp.

"You don't want dinner?"

"No."

Lina turned pale, naturally imagining some kind of sabotage trial. What would become of *her* if they arrested Vitalii? "Just so long as they arrest Ivan Petrovich too, or I'll die of spite in front of his Nina, that blonde bitch." Vitalii Vitalievich Botkin smiled up at the ceiling.

"What is it?"

"A mission abroad . . ."

Lina glowed all over. "My darling." A sudden tenderness threw her into his arms. "The factory is sending just you? Ivan Petrovich?"

"Ivan Petrovich is staying home."

"Oh! I'm so glad. Nina Valentinovna will die of envy!" Lina was overcome with happiness. "You'll bring me back something, won't you darling?"

They did not know it, but their joy bordered on a vast, unexplored domain, beginning at the outer limit of physiology: a domain they would never enter.

Botkin visited factories in London suburbs where poverty is a wasting disease, on the islands of the Seine under a sad smiling sky, on the outskirts of Berlin, clean, grey and bare. On the Thames, on the Seine, on the Spree, little black tugboats belched soot: mostly old tubs—clear evidence of capitalism's decrepitude. The London buses were comfortable, the Paris ones smelly and bumpy; similarly the Metro had no elevators, but the London Underground . . . From these signs, as well as from the dirt on the streets and the old facades of Paris, Botkin recognized that a profound disease was eating away at the French bourgeoisie. Because of the upholstered seats of the London buses, the British Empire seemed more solid to him than people said. All his misfortunes—if indeed they were misfortunes—came from these incidental reflections, for he concluded: "Trotsky is wrong again in announcing the decline of the British Empire . . ." Now, as he was glancing through the titles of Russian publications

displayed on a news-stand on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, Botkin noticed the *Bulletin of the Opposition*, printed on thin paper in pocket-size format. He opened the pages with the edge of his nail: "During the first three quarters of the year the locomotive works have delivered to the country 250 fewer machines than had been forecast. *An extremely serious lack* of skilled labour has been observed. In the course of the summer 2000 workers left the Kolomenskoe factory alone . . ."

"Naturally," thought Botkin. "The instability of personnel today is one of the most troublesome obstacles to industrialization." Botkin bought the *Bulletin*. That subversive paper made his fingertips burn and he quickly picked up the first large-size magazine that came to hand in order to conceal it. This turned out to be full of women in pink negligées. Botkin walked down the boulevard and then walked back up it again to make sure he wasn't being followed, that he hadn't been noticed, that nothing had happened, that nothing would happen. When he reached the Pont Saint-Michel he was seized by the temptation to throw both publications into the Seine—racy drawings and Marxism, classified ads from procuresses and forbidden statistics of the first Five Year Plan. He should have. Caution kept him locked in his hotel room that evening pouring over texts datelined Prinkipo, October 22, 1932: *The Soviet Economy in Danger*. He covered a scratch-pad with writing, staying awake until three o'clock in the morning, for he was taking the express to Berlin that day. "Now, in Berlin, Vitalii Vitalievich, it would be better if you didn't stay in a hotel—that would look suspicious—but at the residence for officials of the Trade Delegation on Lutzowplatz."

". . . *Noted*: The Decree of September 11, 1932 signed Molatov-Kalinin requires individual farmers to lease their horses to the Kolkhozes. The Kolkhozes, working 80% to 90% of the land, are that short of horses. The Kolkhozes recently received 100,000 tractors. Poltava: 19 out of 27 tractors out of commission in a few weeks. Privolzniansk Station, Ukraine: 52 tractors of which two have been out of commission since the spring, 14 undergoing major repairs; of the remaining 36, fewer than half in use

during sowing time and even those unusable half the time (probably for lack of fuel). Calculate the efficiency co-efficient of tractors?"

"*Consider*: disappearance of horses. Horses find their fodder locally; useful for light transport. Tractors unusable for light transport. Problems of fuel supply. Tractorism demands a network of roads, road-tanker service, the construction of railway tank-cars. Billions."

"Increase in mechanized traction: from 306,500 hp in 1928 to 2,066,000 hp in 1932—totally insufficient to compensate for the loss in animal traction."

"Number of households having left the Kolkhozes in six months: 502,000."

"Imbalance between the needs of the Plan and raw material resources (metal shortage, factory slowdowns). Stoppage of new construction due to lack of raw materials and funds. Blocked capital."

There was a bit of everything, pell-mell in these notes. On the quality of production contrasted with the quantitative rate of growth. On wages: "The successes of socialism are defined by the condition of the workers and their role in the State." On the expulsion of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Uglanov, Riutin, Slepkov, Maretski: "Playing hide-and-seek with the Revolution, double-dealing with social classes, playing at diplomacy with history is absurd and criminal. Zinoviev and Kamenev fell for having failed to follow the only valid rule: 'Do what you should, whatever the outcome.' (L.T., October 1932)." On the productivity of labour and the cost of production which, instead of declining by 5% as forecast, has increased by 2.5%. On the Plenum of the Communist International (September 1932 —"Recommended: preparing the dictatorship of the proletariat in Spain under Soviet form." *Think about*: "The Stalinist bureaucracy had become the most formidable internal obstacle to the victory of the proletarian revolution (in Spain). L.T."

"Stop the expropriation of peasants designated as rich (Kulaks), the cause of the disorganization of agriculture. Revise the plans: enough gigantomania. Moderate effort, adjust construction to needs."

Comment: *Very reasonable. I thought so from the beginning.*

Marginal Note: *Assuming an average of approximately 5% well-off peasants based on statistics for 1926 (it's true that the Central Bureau of Statistics was a mess) out of a rural population of more than 120 million inhabitants (not 'souls!') liquidation of Kulaks signifies expropriation and deportation of 5 to 6 million persons. Repercussions on agriculture?*

Botkin underlined his own observations with lines so straight you would have thought they were drawn with a ruler.

Impossible to adopt a humanitarian viewpoint.

Man's insignificance in relation to production. Production becomes conscious of itself through the Plan.

Look into: proper maintenance of the labour force (skilled, the only important element) as indispensable as proper maintenance of tools and equipment. The labour force as one element of tools and equipment. Hence: deterioration through undernourishment, overwork, stress. Shock brigades, socialist emulation? Efficiency. Overhead expenses?

Botkin's handwriting was tiny, precise, and polished. He regarded the facts, with which he filled up thirty pages, with a cold eye, with total impartiality, so that no feelings interfered with his judgement. Know, understand, react. Technology needs only lucidity based on exact documentation. Having thought it over, he crossed out the note on the men expelled from the Party—Zinoviev and the others—with a double line in blue pencil: political information of secondary importance. *Ultimate insignificance of politics from the point of view of technology*. Then he went back and tore it up into little pieces which he burned in the ash-tray. The *Bulletin*, also torn into little squares with meticulous care, he drowned in the toilet of the sleeping-car between Aix-la-Chapelle and Cologne. The scratch-pad, read over and pondered, had a similar fate, between Warsaw and Niegoreloe on the border of the land of The Great Plan, where soldiers in long, grey overcoats with green cloth triangles on their collars, attentively searched the luggage of V.&npsp;V. Botkin, Chief Technician of the *Stal-sel-mach-stroy*, travelling on an official mission.

How could he have suspected that in Berlin, while he was strolling in pleasant company on the Tauenzienstrasse, where the trams run over lawns, someone had got into his room, instantly selected among two hundred little keys the one which opened his suitcase, and removed the articles in it one

by one with a hand so expert it didn't crumple any of them. Expert eyes, even more skillful, remembering the correct position in which to replace each article, deliberately overlooked the big sealed envelopes with the address of the Central Administration for the Construction of Agricultural Machinery. The eyes easily discovered the scratch-pad concealed near the bottom, under some underwear next to the bottle of Houbigant for Lina, opened that notebook, instantly recognized its spirit, the quotations . . . The professional face, a featureless face forever anonymous, brightened into a cunning smile. The hands focussed the stubby housing of a Zeiss lens over the pages of the notebook. Five exposures. It's done. Every object back in place. The suitcase closed. That very evening a confidential packet is sent addressed to the GPU Special Service, Dzerzhinsky Square, Moscow. There typists will make several copies: 1st for the central file, 2nd for the political section (suspected Trotskyists), 3rd for the economic section (suspected saboteurs), 4th for the foreign section (suspected spies). From the old, gabled, red-brick building facing the walls of Kitai-Gorod to the white, square, fifteen-storey tower at the top of Kuznietski-Most telephones communicate a new name among that day's harvest of names. A name to be filed among the millions of names already registered, known, studied, worked over, liquidated, emptied by administrative death of everything human they contained: Botkin, V. V.

From his first contacts with the Central Administration in Moscow, where he presented his reports, the strange expressions on people's faces informed him of the events that had taken place in Stalingrad. A colleague told him about them, confidentially, when they were alone in the cafeteria among the cold reflections of frosted glass walls, stiff potted palms, white oil cloths, portraits frozen in the torpor of a hospital or an empty steamship. The waitress, leaning on her elbows with her hands over her ears, was turning the yellowed pages of a pre-war novel. The colleague was sipping his curds by little spoonfuls. A congealed silence fell from the too-high ceiling.

"Locked up, all of them, Vitalii Vitalievich. You understand: the year's funds all spent and only 60% of the construction plan for the first seven months of the current fiscal year completed. A disaster, what? At that rate,

the factory would have cost twice the projected figures and wouldn't have been completed until three years after the target date."

"By God," exclaimed Botkin, delighted to have been absent for three months, "I told them so! They should have foreseen the lack of materials, the fluctuations in prices, the shortage of transport, the decline in the purchasing power of the rouble, the labour shortage, the famine." He would have foreseen everything.

"In any case," replied the colleague, dropping his head, "if they had foreseen it, they would have been locked up even sooner, blamed for exaggerating their estimates, not believing in the stability of the rouble, banking on the disorganization of transport, underestimating the economic possibilities. Gerasimich more or less said all that to the Planning Sub-Commission. He got five years."

Botkin made an evasive gesture. A worrier, this colleague, and a little bit anti-Soviet. How right they are not to entrust official missions to these fellows! After all, wasn't Gerasimich an old social-democrat, pessimistic on principle? Pessimism, in our age of disciplined energy, is perhaps an involuntary form of sabotage. Botkin, quite at ease in a London-tailored suit, satisfied with himself, with his luck and with a world in which some people's blunders automatically facilitate others' advancement, concluded: "It'll all work itself out. As for myself, I feel that miscalculations harmful to the State must be paid for. You have to have a sense of responsibility. Man doesn't count compared to production."

"I agree entirely," mumbled the colleague, terrified, with suddenly distant politeness. His hand was holding his empty glass of curds, a large, dreary, faceted glass, all milky. It was all there was between them at the moment.

Botkin was arrested the next day as he was leaving an Administration meeting. They didn't interrogate him until two months later, towards midnight. The suit of fine English wool retained its impeccable appearance, throughout tribulations. But the man—thinner, without underwear, his face drowning in stubble, his shoes unlaced—looked in it like a bogus wild man from a circus act, a ruined gambler picked up by the Bobbies around the London docks, a dirty, counter-revolutionary saboteur caught red-handed. He learned that five charges were hanging over him: smuggling (on

account of the two flasks of Houbigant brought home for Lina); sabotage; counter-revolutionary activities; and espionage (economic and political). Various paragraphs of Article 58 of the Penal Code threatened him with several death penalties. Two attentive officers observed him from an angle, while a third exhorted him at length to confess. Botkin did not feel any excessive astonishment during this mysterious game. On the contrary, he felt a certain impersonal satisfaction at finally understanding the way these shady, commonplace things are done. But fear wore him down in the stifling murmur of the cells; fear, foul air, the pittances devoid of calories, a sexual half-frenzy which revived every few days at regular intervals. His cell-mates, five technicians, seemed more anxious than he did. "Out of five, they'll certainly shoot one. The rest, gentlemen, is no more than a matter of probabilities."

Confess to smuggling, to sabotage, to Trotskyism, to counter-revolution, to espionage, confess, confess, confess, confess, confess. Botkin dropped his head, indignant, resigned, sorry not to be able to discover in himself any sins to acknowledge, except for the two vials of perfume for Lina. That, yes, I confess, I brought them in illegally.

"Obviously. We have the material evidence. With all due respect, citizen Botkin, we also have other material evidence. But when I produce it, understand that it will already be too late for your salvation." With these words (this was in the sixth month of wearing down his nerves), the investigating judge opened his drawer, took out an envelope, removed a photographic print which he sternly handed to the accused. Botkin took a moment to recognize his handwriting. It looked strange to him on that grey, glossy paper, for he had all but forgotten his notebook, covered with writing one night in Paris, reread on the train between Berlin and Warsaw, destroyed in the toilet of the sleeping-car an hour from the Soviet border, Niegoreloe. It was all so improbable, unfair, mad, crushing, improbable.

"Confess, confess, confess, confess. Ah! You understand?" He understood all right and blanched to the point of fainting under his blond stubble. Then—all at once—he began to talk volubly. He confessed, denied, demonstrated, explained, pleaded. Two uniformed men drank in his words. A stenographer recorded them without his knowledge behind the drapes.

"But after all, Botkin, now that nothing but repentance can save you, you'd do better also to confess that on April 30th last, when you abstained from taking the floor at your company Technicians' Conference, you did so deliberately in order to allow construction costs to be inflated by 8%, as one of your accomplices had proposed."

"If you wish," said Botkin, undone, no longer believing in reality, the truth, himself. Believing only in death, which surprises you from behind in the depths of a cellar and smashes your skull, probably without pain. Everything around him was heaving, floating, changing its shape, slipping away. His head was itching, his back aching. He had a great yearning for sleep. To sleep peacefully for one night before being shot. What more to desire.

He was spared the cellar of ultimate anguish. It even worked out rather well in the end, for when Botkin reached Projects Office No. 4 of the SPCC, Special Purpose Concentration Camp, Kola Peninsula (latitude 68° 8', longitude 37° 2'), he found a dozen colleagues, slide-rules, a draftboard, excellent technical dictionaries in German, and a quiet corner. Through a skylight he could see a stony heath overhung with clouds which the north winds sometimes moulded into prodigious aerial battles. From the office to the dormitory-barracks it was a good hour's walk through the empty spaces under the clouds. And for Botkin that hour became an hour of unexpected joy: he spent it with a travelling companion of dull appearance whose name was just as dull—Ivanov or Petrov or Pavlov. He was an economist by profession, an old Party member although young in years, a Trotskyist, accustomed for the past six years to deportations, imprisonment, concentration camps, transfers; a lad of methodical and ironic disposition. With him Botkin felt for the first time in his life that he could talk as if he were thinking aloud, without fear, doubt, or reservation. The other man responded in kind, simply. The things they said to each other on that deserted heath, and in safety, would have been enough anywhere else to destroy them forever. Here, this brought them closer together in an absolute disinterestedness.

Botkin described his journey to the West. "It's good to speak freely," he said once. It seemed to him that he had finally understood the singular

pleasure of living in the Western countries, even though—with their lights burning bright into the night, their pretty women, their parliaments, their newspapers full of crime stories, their chronic unemployment, the little, old tug boats of the Thames—they reminded him of great liners steaming towards shipwreck. "Can you imagine, Ivanov, that in London or Paris you can talk anywhere, to anyone, about anything, just as we are talking? You pay two francs at a kiosk on the Boulevard Saint-Michel and you can buy the *Bulletin of the Opposition*, all the bulletins of all the oppositions in the world if you like, in every language. Imagine . . ."

"No," answered Ivanov, "I can't imagine it. I've never been abroad and I hadn't yet reached the age of consciousness when there was still freedom within the Revolution. In a few years, when all the old people who went through the Tsar's prisons are dead, no one among the seventy million citizens of the Union will be able to imagine what freedom of thought is. People will have to be crazy in order to escape the fixed ideas stamped on their brains by mechanical stencils."

Botkin's gaze ranged over the heath, looking for something on which to rest his eyes. There was nothing. The hills on the horizon were flat. "Technological progress will become impossible," said the engineer. "Why did it become impossible in ancient society? Because slavery . . ."

Ivanov shrugged his shoulders. "No. It'll all explode one fine day. Deep inside man there will always be . . ."

"Then you believe in the irrational?"

"I believe in the proletariat."

Botkin's photographic memory enabled him to reconstruct almost word for word what he had secretly read in the West. Invisibly, across the silence of the heath, the entire contents of his notebook, revitalized, entered Ivanov's mind. The Communist laughed, quietly, without apparent reason. So this is how ideas cross borders!

Ivanov spent half of his days in his glassed cubicle at the statistics office composing messages inscribed with a drawing pen on slips of tissue-paper the width of postage stamps and several times longer, in perfectly formed characters that could only be deciphered with a magnifying glass. One message for the deportees in Semipalatinsk, Central Asia; another for those

in Kansk, Western Siberia; a third for those in Chernoe, Black-Waters, in the North. "Dear Comrades, the fate of the Revolution is being decided at each hour. We think for millions of silent proletarians." No one will ever know how these messages got out, carried by the mail-planes of the penitentiary; nor what miracles of ingenuity enabled them to arrive at their destination. They were received in Semipalatinsk, the city of the sands, on torrid days under a sun of blazing coals; in Kansk, a station on the Trans-Siberian, on days of bright-blue frost; in Chernoe one spring morning on a steppe sown with pale buttercups.

* * *

It's good to be alive.

Let us agree that these events, taking place on totally different levels of creation, have no perceptible relationship. But the fact is that myriad buttercups covering the plains with a golden powder had opened precisely as Comrade Fedossenko was arriving that morning. His being was entirely open, like those flowers, to a mute felicity. It is necessary to use the word *being*, when speaking of him. It would be totally incompatible to speak of his soul, or even of his mind, although the cerebral mechanism of a higher vertebrate endowed with speech, with thought up to a certain point, even with 'historic consciousness' (to use his own expression), functioned quite efficiently inside his cranium. This was wide, round and flattened at the temples. A being thick in all respects: bones, muscles, jaws, brows, and occupying a massive rank in the universe. The Regional Centre's Ford wound its way, hours on end, through vast landscapes over which the light was ascending, on which golden buttercups were opening. Squarely seated in his warm winter coat bearing brand new insignia, sewn on the night before last, Comrade Fedossenko inhaled the still-cold air of the pure spaces.

The Ford, at which people gaped wonderstruck, made one last turn around Lenin Square, opposite the church with the broken dome, before parking in front of the Security building. The sentry presented arms. Fedossenko saluted back exactly like the People's Commissar for Defence in

the newsreels: with a brief, incomplete, yet clearly delineated movement, arm raised, hand curved eight inches from his cheek. Careless familiarity, firmness, discipline, that's what I'm like, citizens. Let us model ourselves after Climentii Efremich Vorochilov, the ex-steam-fitter from Lugansk, the inflexible People's Commissar, the man of iron. And long may he live!

If Fedossenko had been in the habit of talking to himself, it would have sounded like a Party meeting. But he wasn't. When he was alone, he either worked, going over reports in his memory, or pursued his professional studies, through correspondence courses, or rested without thinking about anything, satisfied with himself, with his well-run administration, with the established order, with the triumphant building of socialism. At this point, he was emerging from a strange lethargy haunted by depressing dreams which were unworthy of him. Listen.

Every night men wearing grey-leather belted overcoats hanging down to the snow, men with horsey backsides, went about their duties, always the same, always different. They went down into cellars, climbed rickety stairs in the pungent smell of rooms heated with cow-dung. They made their way under miraculous moonlit skies (nothing is that simple), through shimmering fields of snow, without lifting their heads towards the huge halo ringing the moon with blue radiance. They dictated reports, filled out forms, annotated files, transmitted orders, carried out sentences. But in reality they were sleep-walking, like the whole dictatorship, like the whole earth. And the one-hundred-thirty or one-hundred-seventy thousand workers in the special camps (no one knows the exact figure), who were digging through heaths, through swamps, through granite, through forests, through islands, through the inland fjords of Karelia, digging the Baltic-White Sea Canal so that the red squadrons of Kronstadt in the next war will be able to reach the emerald highway of the Arctic without having to sail around Scandinavia; these one-hundred-thirty or one-hundred-seventy thousand convicts undergoing re-education through labour were sleepwalking too, numbed with the cold, while they dynamited chunks out of the mountains of the legendary Trans-Onega, *Za-Onegie*. To complete the Plan—law, commandment, faith, punishment, pride, the Plan—they attacked the hard, frozen earth along the seacoast of Pomorie with pick and

shovel, with excavating machines, with the furious, relentless hands of intellectual mystics, of technician-saboteurs, of farmers snatched from their farms for having over-bountiful harvests, of pilfering or bungling workers, of orthodox priests, of unlucky officials, of corrupt Communists, of authentic counter-revolutionaries and of even more authentic victims.

They worked by night as well as by day, under the light of floodlamps, in bursts of driving snow, barely seeing in the moving whiteness which kept burying everything, burying them with their machines, their leaders, and even the shadow of their pre-eminent leader, thrice decorated, over-decorated, Heinrich Grigorievich Yagoda, he who walks two steps behind the Leader of Leaders at celebrations. The work sites, for which the blizzards contended at every minute, were set ablaze with the light of torches and flood lamps so that at dawn Comrade Fedossenko, in charge of the sector, might write in his report: "Today the shock brigades surpassed the plan for the day's work by 38%. Two men were injured by an excavating machine, six fell sick . . ." Fedossenko, like an angry Peter the Great scouring the docks of his New Holland in the mud of a future Saint Petersburg; Fedossenko, his grey overcoat sweeping through the snow, his leather straps, his revolver, his broad tanned face under his astrakhan hat, his centaur's neck; Fedossenko forged through the biting cold, the snow, the wind, the night, the suffering, the inner despair of his brigades, punishment and reward on his lips—merciless punishment, immediate reward: disciplinary battalions, double rations, extra correspondence—I am recommending you for the expected discharge (all you have to do is survive!); Fedossenko of the Special Political Administration (GPU) of Krasnovodsk, Turkmenistan, Transcaspia, three thousand miles from here, on the banks of the great inland sea whose waters, the saltiest in the world, are warm and heavy. He himself was here to expiate a serious offence, a crime (let's use the word) for which he was halfway pardoned on account of his merits as an ex-cavalry man of the invincible 'Gai' Division—and his more recent merits in various repressions. This memory still sometimes filled his skull with damp heat. "I'm a strong man, you see—a bronze Bolshevik, but I can't completely dominate my instincts," he told his

superiors, standing at attention in front of them, without blushing, but dying of shame in his heart!

Listen. He had drunk. The evening was blazing over the flat, pearly-hued sea. He was stifling in the low room darkened by the Bokhara carpets on the walls. He rang. "Have Miriam, the waitress at the club, arrested. Lock her up in the cellar for three hours—alone—and have her brought to me at ten o'clock." He, himself, spent the next three hours locked in his own room alone, his heavy eye seeing nothing but Miriam, absent, locked in two floors below. At ten o'clock, the phosphorescent sea grown dark, Miriam entered, a prisoner. The dark carpets hung around them like a song of Bokhara accompanied by an irritating grating of strings. Miriam, her thin eyebrows winglines against the sky, was trembling. Her lips trembled, her glance trembled. Something elusive trembled deep in her eyes, in the corners of her lips, on the tips of her breasts veiled by a cotton print. Miriam—tall, white, broader through the shoulders than through the hips. "Don't be afraid, my beauty," said Comrade Fedossenko, whose tongue was thick but whose speech was distinct. "You have nothing to fear. Drink." He handed her a glass of muscatel. "Drink. I'm telling you to drink, understand." She drank. "Get undressed."

"You have no right, Comrade Chief . . ."

What could those trembling words do—and what is right? Here the images became confused. It was necessary to drive them away, they became tormenting. For the crime against the Party ethic—*part-ethika*, the law, duty, the regulations of the Service—the undeniable crime remained intoxicating, the only moment in a life which was worth its full weight of eternity; and there was no more crime, no victim. It was just, right. It was the working of natural law, since he had the power, represented order, was appointed by his superiors, was deserving, rewarded according to his merits.

Why cry about it? Let old women who still wear black veils up to their eyes sob at the outrage and tear their cheeks with their nails. What is necessary is to act, to write. Miriam, lips sealed, careful and stealthy as a cat, waited for nights and for days before sneaking away at the hour when shadows lengthened across the cooling earth, behind the caravanserai bereft of caravans, into the booth of Saadi, public stenographer, poet, physician,

seer. For all knowledge is but a poem. Every poem expresses a charm and charms cure and poets see. Saadi knew verses for every circumstance in several languages—Turkish, Arabic, Iranian—verses by the other Saadi, by Firdosi, his own verses and those of the Poet Without Name who has travelled the trails of Iran since the reign of Iskander a thousand years ago.

The old man, whose glance held a dark benevolent warmth, saw Miriam's embarrassment. He took both her hands like a father, like no father had ever taken them, received from her unclenched little fist a green three-rouble-piece which he polished with his finger before putting it away, and asked: "Someone has hurt you? Offended you, little girl? Tell me everything before God who listens to us and I will write your complaint so well that the men with leather coats and hearts of stone will be moved by it. I will write your love so prettily that the man with the heart of flesh will cry from tenderness thinking about you. But I see, O one like unto a cool stream, that someone has hurt you."

Turbaned, covered with old, faded silks, he slowly shook his sparse beard of white threads through which the old leather of his sunken cheeks was visible. Miriam spoke to him without shame, simply, her face closed—closed over a bottomless anger, without tears, without words, without gestures. An anger like a thirst, but to slake that thirst it would have been just to kill without anger. Old Saadi wrote out twenty intricate—yet very clear—lines in his beautiful calligraphy on the back of a page by Leon Nicolaievich Tolstoy, torn out of a book whose unintelligible title was written in a tongue of infidels: *The Kreutzer Sonata*. On the wrapping-paper envelope (Saadi made them himself, and someone had to steal him the grey sheets from the store reserved for Security), Saadi wrote "To the Esteemed Citizen-Chief of the Complaints Bureau at the Editorial Office of *Izvestia*, central organ of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets of the USSR, Moscow, Tverskaya Street."

"Do not, my wounded gazelle, send this letter from here. Have it cross the sea and let it be posted at the great city beyond the sea, at Baku, and then be silent. The flowers of the fields keep silent even when an ass tramples them; but the flowers of the fields spring up again, the sun of

Allah shines for them, while an ass will never be more than an ass, *ichak* . . ."

Miriam left feeling relieved, tying her shawl under her chin with a determined gesture. For a moment she was all alone in the deserted alley lined by yellow clay walls which led towards the low dome of a tomb. Slender, erect, bearing her silent anger with deadly pride. Her letter was opened among many others in Moscow, the capital of the universe, under a high casement-window in a square building in the style of Le Corbusier. Presses were humming faintly in the basement, typewriters were devouring despatches from all over the world, linotype machines were moulding official texts into shiny lines of type, one by one. On the telephone, Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin was smiling at one of the Secretary General's secretaries, who was dictating the ideas for tomorrow's editorial to him: "No indulgence toward the double-dealing capitalist States with their democratic pretentions. We refuse—you understand, Nikolai Ivanovich, we refuse to prefer them to the fascist States. You must emphasize democratic hypocrisy." His face tense, Nikolai Ivanovich agreed into the receiver, even repeating the slogans—and he thought it was absurd, pure cretinism, a policy of ruin; that he would go see Alexis Ivanovich Rykov that very evening. They must not gamble with the fate of the Republic like this. We must deliberate, we must reflect upon this. While his mind was formulating the phraseology of the editorial he had been ordered to write taking care not to lay himself open to malicious interpretation, he was simultaneously formulating the opposite, correct thesis: "In our behaviour toward other powers, we must not neglect their domestic regimes, the conditions they impose on the working class."

At the Complaints Bureau, in one of the offices on the same floor, an ambitious young careerist, recently selected by the Central Committee of Youth to study at the Central Journalism Institute, was pouring over old Saadi's calligraphy. He remembered that the Chief of the Political Administration Department of State Security for Transcaspia was believed to have had ties with the Rightists. If this young prodigy, gifted in the secondary but indispensable roles of political intrigue, had by chance devoted his talents to astronomy, he would by the age of twenty-two have

learned the signs, interdependencies, solsticial motions, and exact locations of almost all the stars down to the seventh magnitude. But the only constellations he knew so thoroughly were those of the "apparatus": the subtle links between hidden interests, friendship, marriage, complicity, and ideology, connected by imaginary lines invisible to the ordinary eye. He, therefore, immediately perceived that G, a member of the Party since 1907, having sponsored Comrade N, Chairman of a local Cheka, during the creation of the Red Cavalry at Tambov in 1920, could hardly be extraneous to the advancement of B, Chief of Police Forces in Transcaspia. He, in turn, was related by the marriage of his sister to M, Deputy-Commissioner of the Post Office and Telegraph Service and belonged for these two reasons to the coterie of the Right. This man Fedossenko, Chief of the Service at Krasnovodsk, Turkmenistan, today accused of rape and abuse of authority, had been appointed by R, was in his confidence, and would thus compromise him in the case of an investigation. R would compromise B. Through B, the affair would reach as far as N, still a Deputy Member of the Central Committee, and end up by bespattering G, who was reputed unimpeachable. "A conscience," thought the young prodigy scornfully. He tossed the grey envelope into the basket for "serious cases to investigate" and this gesture, between cigarettes, interrupted Fedossenko's advancement. It caused the burly fellow to be swept away by a cold wind, from the borders of the burning desert of Kara-Koum and the mountains of Tschil-Mamet-Koum, lilac-pink in the evening, to the convict labour construction sites of Trans-Onega, *Za-Onegie*.

At the construction sites of the North, Fedossenko found Klavdia, servant of the administrative personnel. She was a pale, little Siberian girl, twice convicted for illegal alcohol sales: one rouble for a little glass pulled out of her petticoat pocket for the ragged fellow who has only that one rouble. Klavdia obeyed. She was born to obey as he was born to command. She would never complain. Fortunately, for this time he might have got six millimetres of pointed steel in the back of the neck by order of his superiors. Thin and tidy, crafty, good-tempered, with pearls in the depths of her eyes, she filched half his rations without him daring to complain about it—at least so long as she still pleased him. Later, he would see if it was

worth it. It wasn't love, once glimpsed fleetingly in the midst of a criminal act. And it wasn't happiness either: that comes from success.

Happiness returned to him, summoned by merit. From the construction sites of the Special Purpose Concentration Camp of the Baltic-White Sea Canal, where one hundred thirty, one hundred seventy, perhaps two hundred thousand workers of both sexes were forging themselves new souls filled with enthusiasm for work (all you have to do is survive) as they completed a historic labour more memorable than the digging of the Suez Canal, than the digging of the Panama Canal, than the digging of the Saint-Gothard tunnel, than the draining of the Zuyderzee; comparable to no other, and planned by the far-seeing genius of the most admirable Leader—from those grey, frozen excavations over which dull glints of steel hung indefinitely, Comrade Fedossenko, reintegrated into the regular ranks by reason of the perfect execution of the plan by the convicts entrusted to his command, arrived one May day at Chernoe, Black-Waters, to take over the administration of the GPU Special Service: Party morale, surveillance of deportees, secret operations. As he took leave of his subordinates he received from the hands of engineer V. V. Botkin of the Technician's Shock Brigade of Bureau No. 4, an inkwell of iridescent quartz hand-carved by convicts who, paying their thanks to an unforgettable educator in the person of Fedossenko, thus demonstrated the completion of their civic regeneration.

The iridescent inkwell now contained a large drop of red. Through a transparent tulle curtain, Fedossenko glanced at the paths traced by the feet of pedestrians crossing the square around the little bronze Lenin. Elkin and Ryzhik were passing, bareheaded, leaning slightly forward into the fresh spring breeze. The new Deputy Chief of the Special Service took up his binoculars to follow them more closely. We are the vigilant, the responsible, the powerful, the cutting edge of a new world emerging from chaos. We are order. *I'll* show you.

Comrade Fedossenko immediately set about correcting abuses. Summoned to his office, Avvakoum Nestorovich, Chairman of the Soviet, signed a decree forbidding citizens with the right to vote to house transported persons, known as "special settlers". This, so that the pernicious

influence of expropriated peasants should not develop among the local population. It was a little, grey poster containing several spelling errors. Old men with white beards, several of whom resembled Tolstoy; mature men, bearded and hairy, who had resembled no one but themselves since the days of the Scythian invasions; young peasants, some athletic, some emaciated; women dressed in homespun, clutching infants to bosoms barren of all happiness (with other children clinging to their skirts)—this whole silent crowd, stinking like corpses and animals, gathered in front of the entrance of the Security building. They waited a long time in the biting cold of that day. Then they dispersed in small groups through the alleyways, straggled out along the paths leading to the little wood which stands on the other side of the river, and disappeared inexplicably, as if absorbed into the earth and the rocks. It is true that no one paid any attention to them. The women and urchins roamed from door to door on the outskirts of town where the open spaces begin, pleading in the name of Christ, the Son of God, and your soul's salvation, for a crust of bread. The extraordinary thing is that they ended up by getting it, even though bread was selling for four roubles a pound, eight times its legal price, and there wasn't any even at that price. At the edge of the wood, the Tolstoys took axes and cut down young trees, still shimmering with sap, to cover dugouts cut into the earth by their sons. In the evening the edge of the steppe was fringed with columns of smoke. Two families lived under an outcropping of rock on the bank of the Black-Waters, sheltered from the wind by the bluff. The Soviet published a new decree forbidding the special settlers to cut timber, which was collective property and henceforth sacred.

Fedossenko, flushed with attention, studied the political deportees' mail, secretly opened on arrival and departure. He also took courses, by correspondence, from the Higher Institute of the Security Department. Lesson XXII, *Investigative Methods in the United States*. Psychology, XIth Lesson. *The Psychology of the Professional Mind*. A. Military officers. Leninism. IV. *The Teachings of Comrade Stalin in the struggle against Trotskyism. B. On the unequal development of the Capitalist countries*. This learning reduced to sections, paragraphs, key sentences, boiled down to twenty-line summaries for each lesson with questions to ask yourself on

your own (see Answers on the back page of the book) did not teach him how to decipher unconquerable souls. Fedossenko examined a postcard covered with tiny writing, signed Ryzhik, through a magnifying glass. The glass magnified the loops of the letters, revealed the texture of the cheap yellow cardboard, but the subtle spirit of the text escaped it. "Eh! Psychology be damned!" thought Fedossenko. "I'll still make you sweat blood."

* * *

The town got news at one and the same time that the District Cooperative had received a tank truck of kerosene oil and that the Tobacco Trust store was putting twelve cases of *Red Factory* cigarettes up for sale at sixty-five kopecks a pack in the morning. To tell the truth, they were unsmokable but what won't people smoke! Any kind of straw is smokable. Any alcohol is drinkable, even the kind that rots your guts, wrecks your vision, turns your skin green and your lips purple. We'll drink poison by the glassful, as long as it distils heat and strength inside us so we can holler, cry, sing, laugh and collapse out of the world, on the side of the road, insensitive to the cold, warming the earth ourselves. Three lines of people formed on Comrade Lebedkin Street. The one in front of the bakery contained the oldest women and the frailest girls, for bread was obtainable. The grey card entitled you to it. It was simply a question of waiting your turn to avoid being put off until the next day. Those at the head of the line read (written in pencil on a piece of paper stuck to the door) "the coupon for the 20th is void". Barely murmured, these words passed from the first old woman to the last little girl and were instantly taken in by a hundred anaemic beings glued together against the wall. No one was surprised. It was normal procedure to "skip" a day every ten days so that the 10th, the 20th and the 30th of each month were breadless. But when one woman said that next month's cards would be denied to non-workers belonging to workers' families, except for children under fifteen, there were worried sighs. Eyes dilated with fear in the mould-tinged faces of old women.

The queue for oil formed in front of the closed shop. No one knew for sure whether there really would be oil, whether it wouldn't be sent instead to the co-op reserved for responsible officials. Like the last time, remember? When we spent the whole night waiting for it under compassionate stars and told crime and love stories—only to see the tank truck pull up next morning in front of the Security store! Certain things were definite: there wouldn't be enough fuel for everyone. They wouldn't give out more than three litres per person. Wives and daughters of former Red partisans, armed with the latest certificate (the clerk checks the seal to see if you have passed last year's purge-review—he's a clever devil) would be served out of turn. The wives of fishermen belonging to the prize-winning brigade would complain, but they would be sent packing. Let them wait their turn like everyone else. What good is the prize brigade anyway! It can't even fulfil its production quota. Everyone knows that.

The initiative of the masses was demonstrated in the organization of the queue. You could leave your can, mark it with a stone, and your place thus reserved, go elsewhere—as long as you served your turn on guard. For they're capable of not delivering the fuel until tomorrow . . . I'm telling you, my husband is a truck driver. He knows there are no trucks available. He said so . . . That's nothing. The night will be warm. A few of us will wait up . . . At midnight, when the moon reaches its zenith, the young women, faces all white as if their souls had been brought to the surface of their skins by invisible caresses, will begin to sing softly:

O night of May, O lover mine,
I'll give to thee, I'll give to thee,
On the little bench . . .

(Here a pause. Wait and see what these teasing girls will give their lover on the little bench.)

I'll give to thee my white handkerchief.

Are you satisfied, is he satisfied? *(Spoken)* "If you want something more, go run after the white wolf."

The night watchman, Foma, will suddenly step out of the shadows, the barrel of his rifle behind his shoulder, his beard tinged silver. "That's enough for me, girls . . . *(Enigmatic)* And the white wolf knows who I am."

"Tell us a story, grandfather."

"Dance a little, grandfather."

One hand on his hip, the other held high, old Foma will dance, barely moving in the supernatural moonlight, his heels marking the rhythm of the soft singing of the young girls, worn-out women and little pregnant ones, ugly girls living this moment as if they were beautiful. This will last us for the coming night. Let's not anticipate joys to come. Each hour's sorrow is sufficient unto itself.

Right now the third queue, for cigarettes, is the most interesting since the cigarettes are there. And there aren't enough for the whole town, that's certain. If the company of special troops takes half of them again, what will be left over for ordinary citizens?

The company parades down the street, in ranks of three, indifferent to bread, fuel, cigarettes. Tightly-belted forest green tunics, fingers on rifle triggers, hoods and gas masks whose mica circles give an unknown expression to the human eye. Sweat soaks their faces. The northern air is crystal-clear, but these Red soldiers are already marching through the acrid fogs and mustard gas of future wars, breathing chemical air filtered through the ringed trunks that turn them into monsters.

"Thirteen roubles for a gas mask," they say in the bread queue. "Looks like we're gonna have to buy one. There'll be an order from the Soviet. They'll deduct the price from our salaries."

"I don't want one. Let the gas come, if that's life."

Other low voices repeat, a chorus of murmurs: "If that's life. Yes, that's life."

Avelii joined Rodion in front of the *Tabak-Trust*. They were about sixtieth in line and there were at least a hundred customers behind them. Far back in the queue, Elkin, who has abandoned his projected figures for fishing plans eighteen months from now for this singular occasion, waves to them cheerfully. "In prison where I once did time," says Avelii dreamily, "they put gas masks on the poor fellows to take them to their execution. So

they wouldn't cry out, that was the idea. Only for each, it was one mask down the drain."

"Don't worry about it. They sell 'em for thirteen roubles. They cost three, and they're not worth anything. Anyway, even without 'em, the poor lads don't say anything. They go quietly. I only saw one who was scared stiff, a Kazakh, ex-small-businessman. He hid himself under the cot and he wouldn't come out. He was moaning as if he had a toothache. The guard dragged him out by the hair and slapped him about a bit to bring him round. He turned quiet and well-behaved like all the others. Left without a word. Only turned around to pass his canteen to another Kazakh."

The thirty trunked monsters halted, on command, in front of the Special Battalion dining hall. How easy it is to turn them back into men! Thirty masks with dead round mica eyes fall across thirty chests. There are thirty sweaty young heads held high in line.

"I got fired this morning," says Rodion.

"You too?"

Avelii had lost his job the day before. This morning at seven o'clock as Rodion was putting on his work overall, the gang foreman beckoned to him. "Don't bother. Pack up your things. It's not my fault, you understand. I have an order. Hurry up. Goodbye brother, good luck."

Rodion crossed the market square musing—empty-handed, an odd smile on his face. Bastards. Bastards. "Gonna have to live on their fifteen rouble allotment. Nine roubles for bread by the card leaves six. The corner at Kurochkin's costs thirty. Whose house can I sleep at?" Then Rodion made a deal. Having sold his three day's supply of bread, he drank a big glass of brandy and kept back four roubles for cigarettes and postage-stamps. When you're not doing anything, you can survive pretty well on three hundred grams of bread a day: he would go drink sugared tea at Varvara's—sugar is nourishing.

Their turn was coming up, they were inside the dark shop, six feet away from the counter. "Elkin's right. The Special Service wakes up when springtime comes. We're in for trouble. What do you think of the comrade who just arrived?"

"Kostrov?"

"Yes."

"A good comrade, educated, you know. It's a pleasure to ask him things. He has answers for everything, a real Marxist."

"One of us, or what?"

Rodion hesitated a little. "He signed something, I think, but he's one of us."

The clerk was tossing the little packs of cigarettes out of the cases with both hands and pushing them at the customers as fast as he could pick up the money. "Six packs a head, three roubles ninety and I don't give change. Hurry up. Hurry up, citizen. Next, next, I say." Rodion pushed three yellow bills and some coins across the counter. The clerk swept it all aside. "Next."

"What? What?" said Rodion.

Behind him people were grumbling because he wasn't moving on fast enough. Some carters pushed past him and were served in front of him. At the end of a crushing minute, a tall redhead breathed into his ear in a thick voice. "You can see, there's none for you, eh, kill-joy. Better beat it, you're blocking traffic." Avelii had no time to open his mouth. The clerk thrust his flat, underfed bulldog's face at him: "There's none for you, try to understand, eh." The whispering around them got louder. People were glad. Two less to get served ahead of them—and then, they're the workers' cigarettes. The counterrevolution has no right to them. As they left, the two lads shoved someone—hard. "What happened to you?" Elkin asked them. "I don't suppose the C.C. has ordered a major price-cut?"

He understood instantly. "Let's go into the sunshine, little brothers." He was like a big brother between them, a head taller, rugged and cheerful, built for walking against the wind. Avelii wondered if he shouldn't have pushed in the clerk's snarling yap with three punches from his bony little fist. "Above all none of that!" exclaimed Elkin. "Firstly, the citizen in question, albeit a perfect specimen of shit in every particular, can't do the least thing about it. Secondly, you'd get yourself sent away for three years to dig canals or build pyramids. On a charge of assault and battery on a unionized employee. Thirdly, the newspapers would say that the Trotskyists are making attempts on workers' lives and preventing the equitable distribution of the products of the *Tabak-Trust*.

"No, my boys, learn to live. We are very likely only at the beginning of the journey. In the first place, we have white bread to eat. As for cigarettes, we'll buy them in the private sector of the economy, there are some right here."

There were, in fact, some—in the dark hands of a ragged, sunbrowned curly-headed urchin of under twelve. He was sitting on the threshold of what was once, before the earthquakes, the house of a wealthy man.

"They've got to live somehow, the youth of the highways, they're the future of our country. He might be a future Beethoven, this little black fellow. You like music, don't you old mate? Beat the drum! Or a future great Commander. I hope he becomes one—one who will take the Kremlin again, lead a new march on Warsaw, and Shanghai and many other things we can't imagine. Isn't that right, you old rascal? Where're you from? From Baku, you say? You seem to me to have many talents. We're going for a drink. If in the next hour you bring me a pocket handkerchief and something else stolen from someone important and well dressed, without leaving the street, I'll give you three roubles. Got it? I'm in the business myself. I had a share in the looting of the Empire.

"We're right, comrades. Right, like stones are right to be hard, like the grass is right to grow, for the Revolution doesn't want to die out. Without us, there would be nothing left of it but reinforced concrete, turbines, loudspeakers, uniforms, victims of exploitation, humbugs and informers. *Now you see it, now you don't!* But we're here—like the ocean floor, and the trick is spoiled! Well that little thief is right to steal. Just as we're right to exist—since it's the only way he can exist. And he's right to exist, for his rags alone are enough to give the lie to a huge falsehood.

"Let's rest in the sunshine for a while. Maybe tonight they'll lock us up in the cellar of the Security building. Keep that in mind and you'll savour this sunshine all the more. I'm teaching you wisdom! One day you'll lie down on a cot in a disheartening darkness. Then remember the sunshine of this moment. The greatest joy on earth, love apart, is sunshine in your veins."

"And thought?" asked Rodion. "Thought?"

"Ah! Right now it's something of a midnight sun piercing the skull. Glacial. What's to be done if it's midnight in the century?"

"Midnight's where we have to live then," said Rodion with an odd elation.

The boy with the hands of a blackamoor caught up with them before they reached the tavern. "Get your three roubles out, Uncle!" he cried triumphantly, waving a dirty handkerchief and a card.

"You little rascal! Do you know you stole the Party card of an important official? I'll put it in the mailbox myself. You don't need it. Neither do I. We belong to another species. As for that rag, throw it into the gutter and promise never to blow your nose in the linen of bureaucrats. Here are your three roubles. Catch!"

"I never blow my nose," the boy declared proudly.

The sunlight streamed down on them, on the town, on the women waiting for the bread of famine, on those who would wait for fuel until the next day (the sorrow of the day is sufficient unto itself), on the grey newspapers pasted on the wall to proclaim the triumphs of industrialization, on the emaciated, long-haired, chestnut ponies, who passed with lowered heads dragging jolting carts. The sunlight.

* * *

Varvara carried her package home from the post office herself, a small crate weighing ten kilos. She was obliged to halt every hundred metres because of the weight. Avelii arrived just in time to help her pull the nails out of the lid. Avelii's long fingers preserved a manifest elegance in every kind of work, touching, pressing, bending, folding with powerful grace. Varvara watched them pulling out the nails, which he had not entirely removed with the pincers, perhaps to give himself the pleasure of that agile little movement. She thought hazily that these hands were made many lives ago (the same lives extinguished and rekindled) to weave supple wicker, to glaze pottery, carve silver, notch arrows onto bows, tease the falcon perched on the left fist . . .

"What are you dreaming of Varvara?" asked Avelii. He saw in her eyes that look, at once absent and intimate, that we have when, perhaps unawares, we reach out so intensely toward another person—toward the

deep, multiple self within his parcel of eternity—that we stop noticing him in the present.

"Nothing. It's nothing, Avelii, I just can't understand why they sent me this package. It's not the right date. They said they were sending books. What does it mean?"

Avelii's eyes were also intent. He looked as a brown-turbaned falconer, lips drawn back over clear white teeth, would look at the flight of his hunting bird. Except that Avelii was following, through spaces interior to his own mind, a straight path of reflection to which he had been trained in the best schools of political imprisonment.

"You know, Varvara, as soon as you showed me that postcard, I thought we'd be getting some *mail*."

The slight stress placed on that word gives it a peculiar, almost magical quality.

There is dried black bread, sugar, lard, cigarettes, a picture of Katia, stained by the lard. Three-year-old, fat-cheeked Katia, an adorable little Kalmuck with an embroidered cap and curls. The packing has obviously been unwrapped, then redone by the secret Inspector.

"That new man, Fedossenko, takes care of it himself, I'll bet," mutters Avelii. "That fat lout sitting in his office makes me think of a hunter lying in wait—and we're his prey. A jailer's soul in a bear-hunter's body."

There are books: Volume II of the beautiful Academia Edition of *The Arabian Nights*, a Pilniak novel, a slim volume of Pasternak, opened immediately, and on a page over which hovers a luminous trail:

The five mirrors have the face
of the storm shedding its mask . . .

Varvara reads aloud, smiling, looks at Katia's picture, puts the poetry book down on the bread. "And yet I don't understand."

Lightning-bolts, forever momentary.
Come illuminate these bright recesses of the mind . . .

Take up each object, prod it shrewdly. Let it reveal itself. No signs on the oily paper or on the scraps of newsprint used to wrap the bread. Avelii examines it line by line: there might be nearly invisible dots sown among the letters of the text. Sometimes pencil marks, sometimes pin pricks, spaced out among the letters to form a text. *They* know that trick. They know almost every trick. But if it wasn't for their stupidity, their negligence, the impossibility of checking everything, no mail would be possible. The tears in the newspaper might contain a clue. Nothing.

"You know, Varvara, *they* often change the wrapping on packages as a precaution. A poor method."

Varvara leafs through *The Arabian Nights*, disappointed by the illustrations which imitate old Persian manuscripts. The eyes of the beautiful Sultanas are quite as inexpressive as their round breasts. "It's a good edition," she says. Avelii takes the book from her hands, tests its weight, prods the ornamented cover.

"If there's any mail, Varvara, it must be in here. That's what I think. And there must be mail, for we can't go on living like this. My God! Five months without news. Rodion has begun to think all by himself. He needs ideas so badly that he invents them. You can imagine what he invents. Pass me the scissors, will you? To Hell with their Academia bindings created to corrupt the taste of the proletariat. And if it doesn't contain anything, don't make long faces at me, O.K.?"

Nothing in the outer cardboard box. "Neither theses nor counter-theses. If that's the way it is, dear comrade, I really feel like tearing your book into tiny shreds which we will burn later." It's not a pretty sight, a new book, a precious object, at the mercy of scissors.

Varvara begins to banter sarcastically: "You see, that's what they do to people. They suddenly pluck out their little soul, with all its little freshly imprinted stories. They slice through the middle and they see there's nothing inside. They even realize that it wasn't a soul but something entirely material, useless and empty."

Avelii answers: "Don't talk nonsense. There's nothing apart from the body. But the body is damned intelligent. And clean inside, full of marvellously beautiful blood."

He was about to throw the massacred book away. He removed the back cover, which seemed too thick to him. "Well, what was I telling you?" From the torn linen emerged, folded lengthwise, the thin slips which Ivanov had covered with microscopic calligraphy in Projects Office No. 4 of the SPCC, Special Purpose Concentration Camp, on Kola Peninsula. Avelii could not have felt more joy watching his trained falcon swoop down on a hare in the sweet-smelling grass.

"What were you saying, Varvara: *Lightning bolts, forever momentary . . .*"

"I can't believe my eyes," said Varvara sadly.

She had been standing; she seemed to fold, sat down, hands gripping the table edge. And what little colour she had in her cheeks vanished. Her face became ashen. The mail, yes, the incredible mail which had stopped coming months ago. Since the latest betrayals. Those little transparent slips covered by carefully aligned grains of sand, which were letters, which were words, thoughts, truths for the Revolution. The meaning of our lives, since nothing else is left. Not even the child, not even the man, not even hope, the least hope, for oneself. I will grow old like this. Almost ugly already. A woman only by the misery that no one knows. There is nothing left but our defeat, firmly accepted since it must be. For we can neither separate ourselves from the proletariat, nor disobey the truth, nor ignore the course of history. And for the moment the dialectic of history has placed us under the wheel. Life goes on, thanks to us. The victories will begin again when we are no more. And now here it all is. The comrades, the theses of the Tobolsk Isolator, the statement of the Central Committee of the Tara exiles, a resumé of the latest issues of the Opposition *Bulletin* published in Berlin, edited in Prinkipo.

The clandestine pages murmured: prison, prison, prison, prison, endless prison. Bars, fences, windows sealed with iron mesh. Regulations, barracks, conflicts, hunger strikes. Mail passed through toilet pipes, through holes pierced in walls, from window to window hanging by a thread over the sentry's head. (And the condemned men awaiting death in the room below, carefully keep it for a while. They're good lads, you can trust them.) Mail written while your ears are cocked and you pretend to read. Then you get a migraine. You despair because of the disagreements, the irreducibly opposed

viewpoints. Splits are ripening. You can see repudiations coming. Years pass. You wrench yourself away from the barracks, the bars, the comrades. You're free, yet it's another form of captivity. You have air, health, people's bread to weigh—almost a nostalgia for prison. Avelii asked:

"You're not pleased?"

"On the contrary, I'm happy."

He did not recognize happiness in this naked, smooth face, drained of colour. Her hair—flat, pulled back, cut short—surrounded it with a black frame. She had hollow eyes, pretty nostrils—small and grey. "Of course I'm happy. It's wonderful. We're going to live again. We must tell the comrades. Go on, right now, Avelii." Her eyes were dry, yet she seemed to be on the verge of tears.

* * *

On the square, Avelii ran into Ryzhik, who was on his way home from the Special Service. "They're giving me the sack too," he said, "eliminating my position. The Salvageable Rubbish Co-op no longer needs to draw up plans, it seems. Fedossenko coolly told me that he could do nothing about it. Is the rubbish escaping you, I asked him, or are you drowning in it? Ah! What idiots." Tired contempt altered his voice. (Living with the contempt of the powerful puts a good deal of strain on one's inner strength.) When he heard the news he shook his head. "Be careful. Whom are you thinking of telling? Kostrov? I'm against it, categorically. To have held out in Moscow until last year is a certificate of cowardice, take my word for it."

Rodion was reading on the step of Kurochkin's house. Avelii sat down next to him, put his arm affectionately around his waist, spoke into his ear. And they looked at each other, laughing, eyes sparkling. Elkin, at the Fisheries Trust, was filling in a blank chart a metre long, divided into sixty-five columns. "As a sign of celebration," he said, "I'll put in the highest possible co-efficient here. Tomorrow I'll work out how many tons of fish this will add to those useless estimates. The trouble is that I'm running the risk of winning a bonus from the Director."

The day was nearing its end. Avelii went down toward the Black-Waters and had himself taken over to the other side by the ferryman, a Special Deportee, who, as he rowed, murmured things in a bitter-sweet voice, punctuated by sighs: "Like that, my son, it's like that, *tak to* . . ." The other bank was flat at that spot. Ahead to the North lay the far-off line of the woods, with a gap in the middle opening out to limitless space. Farther, much farther, the sea, the ice. Avelii walked toward an encounter with space. Startled titmice came out of the sky to alight a few steps from him, watch him pass, fly off as he approached, making big circles over his head and then waiting for him again in the grass, as if to guide him. He was grateful to them for not being afraid of him and for correctly guessing the way he was going without knowing it. They surrounded him with light benevolent presences. He walked, shoulders high, lungs expanded, not a single image remaining in his eyes, nothing left before him but the reality of earth and space, tinged with gladness. And all at once he sang, amazed at his own voice, a Georgian song whose words had never had a precise meaning for him. But it was full of male strength and sadness, with bursts of joy like cymbal-clashes.

He didn't return to town until well after nightfall. He lived in a loft above an empty store where the rats running around at night made a noise like marbles rolling across the floor. The worm-eaten old building was sinking into the ground. A family was living in the cellar whose windows, with their cracked panes held together with putty, looked as if they were covered with thick spider webs. A reddish glow shone through. Nothing was left of the staircase but two steps, the highest, which the neighbourhood children had not yet torn away. Avelii hoisted himself up and squatted against the door, barred across by the trunk of a young birch. Across the way he saw the roof of another low building silhouetted in black against the sky, and just above that roof, a star, on which he fixed his gaze. He noticed that its twinkling immobility was a perceptible motion. He alone saw that motion. It filled him with a grave joy, at the very bottom of which he felt a stab of anxiety. The frogs were beginning to croak. Somewhere dogs were barking at each other. There were sounds of animals moving in the darkness close by. A crowd of beings was alive in this silence

and the star continued on its unimaginable course. Avelii cracked his knuckles. A muted song filled his chest and his skull. Words sprang to life. Avelii reached out his arm into the solitude, murmuring: "Rodion, brother, it's so simple. I, who don't like to think, understand so well what it is to live."

His body was unwilling to shut itself up in the loft above the rats. His legs still wanted to walk. Man's lodging resembles a tomb. Avelii rebelled at the idea of lying there like a dead man on this eventful evening. "It's not too cold, I'll go out and sleep on the steppe." He moved through wide black streets, turning round from time to time to locate the star, whose motion his own petty movements prevented him from observing. Just so the birds, a little earlier, had turned toward him. He finally stopped in front of a fence, reduced to a few boards and enclosing a yard. In the house a lamp was burning behind a white curtain. Avelii slipped between two boards, crossed the yard, joyously touched the curved front-runner of an overturned sled with his fingertips and knocked very softly on a door robed in darkness.

"Here you are again," said Varvara without any surprise. "I haven't stopped reading since you left. It's hardly prudent . . ."

She pulled back a sheet of newspaper and the messages spread their fine sand of words and ideas.

"We must hide this, Varvara. Why shouldn't those vigilant scoundrels come today? Let me take care of it."

They went to bury the precious papers under the sled, in the yard. Together, fingers touching, they covered them with earth. Later, the room felt singularly empty. The narrow bed, the table, the child's picture on the wall—Katia—the books on the floor, the portable stove, shoes in a corner, abandoned objects in the cold. Varvara crossed her arms over her chest, closing the little summer coat she used as a dressing gown. They were standing in the emptiness close enough to touch and she broke the short, embarrassed silence.

"Won't you sit down for a moment, Avelii?"

"No, I'm leaving, it's late. Go to bed."

That neck, those clean-lined temples, those dusky eyes, that sombre thin mouth half open in expectation—he suddenly saw them against the background of the heath where birds were flying at dusk, the music of the night, the amazing path of a star beyond the horizon, and something else still which was all of that and himself, like the feeling of wings about to spread.

"Well, goodnight Varvara," he said as he took both her hands in his. He thought he was going to leave, step through the door, walk off into the night in complete solitude. Alone, between earth and sky. But he remained there, holding those inert hands in his. Varvara looked at him with great seriousness, considering him from a great distance.

"You're a good comrade, Varvara, and I . . . No, I assure you, it's not love, not at all, or desire. It's . . ."

"And that's what you came back to tell me, Avelii?"

The words meant nothing, perhaps, but the voice was inviting. Sleep and vertigo are like that: you fall into them. Varvara bowed her head slightly and in a hushed voice:

"Well, if you like, Avelii, don't go."

They rediscovered the objects around them. Avelii showed his teeth. Something inside him was laughing, but he didn't laugh. He noticed the narrow bed made up on some packing cases. Varvara had had the same thought, "I'll make up the bed on the floor," she said. They did it together, bumping into each other. Almost playing like children. On top of open newspapers they spread some old furs, a piece of carpet, some winter clothing taken from a trunk in the hall.

Lying next to her, he seemed taller, his flesh rough, his movements unexpected; considerate yet heavy, sure. A gentleness at the bottom of which lay violence. "Don't bruise me," murmured Varvara, seeking a tender word for him and not finding one. A hot wave carried her off, teeth chattering. They didn't go to sleep until they had talked for hours about so many things that it later seemed to them that they had tried to empty their lives in order to mingle them. They would never remember everything. These words exchanged, breath to breath, bodies entwined, hands seeking hands, would always yield new aspects, poignant and revealing. Like clouds

scattered by a strong wind into momentary and never quite graspable shapes. At last she sank toward sleep, her head in the hollow of his shoulder, warmed, small, smooth and radiant. Just on the edge of sleep a warm tear formed under her eyelid and rolled down her cheek to the edge of her lip. She dried it with the tip of her tongue. The tear was salty like sea-water, like the man's skin . . . salty, tonic.

Avelii emerged for a moment from the void at the break of dawn. The little room was suffused with a nameless blue, still nocturnal. Next to him that dark hair, that astonishing profile, that soft breathing. Heavy clouds covered a slumbering earth, valleys, precipices, rushing streams, villages with square towers, haystacks on hillsides, the ruins of one of Tamara's castles, the murmurs of a forest through which does followed velvety trails, single-file. The clouds parted at the instant when the does saw their reflections in the river. A fragment of pure blue pierced the sky. The white tooth of Mount Kasbek displayed its rose-tinted glaciers. Avelii contemplated the peak and saw the sleeping woman with her luminous Asiatic face. You are such a trust-worthy comrade, dear . . . "But perhaps that's what love is," he thought distinctly, with great surprise. The peak brightened, a glint of glaciers and azure caressed Varvara's profile, from her unwrinkled brow to her closed mouth to her boyish chin. And the clouds closed up again over the tall mountain. Specks of gold flowed through the purple night of the man's veins. He fell asleep again, completely entwined with the soft body which continued to abandon itself in sleep.

* * *

The case of the twelve hundred notebooks burst on the scene at the same time as the affair of the seven pound loaf. Bread was delivered to the cooperatives in carts with wooden covers. A militia-man kept the people at a distance while they unloaded it, counting and weighing the round loaves one by one. To speed things up, they got some help from a girl with a kerchief, dumpy in her old winter jacket, and some honest-looking lads. The cart driver would throw out the loaf, which passed from hand to hand until it reached the scale on the counter of the store, where perpetual

shadows reigned. Varvara checked the weight. The Manager made a mark in his notebook for each loaf. He moistened the indigo point with his tongue so that his lips and teeth were smeared with ink. His shaved skull rose above a furrowed brow. He was full of a strained attention which resembled repressed anger. His little eyes would have liked to watch over every hand, touch the scale, foil the malice of numbers. He couldn't, and this cast a grimace of dissatisfaction across his pink face. Of his predecessors in the shop, both appointed like him by the Party Committee (for, according to the directives of the Chief, it is fitting to give responsible positions to workers taken from the ranks), one had been sentenced to three years of forced labour and the other was awaiting trial in the old prison, six hundred metres from here. The Manager was a wood sawyer, an elite member of a shock brigade, a Party member for the past two years, a former fisherman, son of a fisherman. Whenever he sealed a sack, especially the sack of bread he sent to the Special Section of the prison (the one for Communist officials) an involuntary smile relaxed his grimace as he knotted the rope with the skill of a weaver of nets. Once this knot was tied, there was no way to get even a crumb out of the sack, unless it was cut open! He wrote his signature legibly on the receipt: Miorzly, Piotr—Peter the Frozen—handed it over to the carter, signalled to Gavril, the wounded veteran, who restrained the crowd outside: "Stand at the door, don't let more than ten people in at a time . . ." Then he made a sign to Varvara: ready?

Once again, for the fortieth time in a hundred days, Varvara watched misery pass through that narrow door. There was pushing and squeezing and shadows crowded together against the two barred windows. The first women entered, so close one to another that they seemed glued together in a shapeless mass from which only bowed heads emerged. Old women, always the same. There since dawn, stooped, stiff-jointed, gaunt under their colourless shawls and black kerchiefs. Faces marked by mould, tuberculosis, endless famine and desperate guile; shrewd, tearful, red-ringed eyes. Terrible beggar-women who weren't begging, greedy yet resigned, squinting the better to watch the oscillations of the arrow on the scale. Occasionally tossing sharp words out of mouths like mole-holes: "I didn't get my weight,

citizen!" Then Varvara would check, and the weight was there. The political deportee and the famished woman would look at each other as enemies.

For each customer there were three things to be verified in the half-darkness, the hubbub of voices, the smell of fermented rye. The grey card had to be cut. The day's number thrown into a box (to be counted that evening, without misplacing a single one of those tiny, one centimetre squares, since each represented a pound of bread, a human ration, the property of the State, the salvation of a living creature). The blue or black line indicating four or six hundred grams to be delivered, had to be taken into account. Money had to be counted and change given. 47 kopecks for four hundred, 66 for six hundred, plus 22 kopecks for a child's ration. Numbers upon numbers, cheap alloyed coins, worn, ragged, yellow one-rouble notes, smelling of fish. The weight, the essential measure. Varvara cut the right amount almost infallibly give or take a few grams, but they wanted those few grams. She had to add or remove a few crumbs, and instantly there were children's hands, children's eyes—plaintive, devouring eyes—reaching for them. How did they get in? Where did these little boys with runny noses, these tousled girls with vermin-infested curls come from? Every three quarters of an hour Gavril came in and grabbed them by the collar or the hair, good-naturedly,—beat it pests, spawn of Kulaks!—but they squirmed, shilly-shallied and reappeared instantly among the skirts and shawls, their sharp little voices cutting through the din, to beg in singsong: "A little piece of bread! A little piece of bread, grandmother, aunty, uncle!" Pregnant women pushed their bellies forward and got served out of turn as did women with nursing infants. But one of the latter provoked recriminations: "She hasn't nursed for a long time, and she could leave him at home. She brings him along on purpose, she has no right." Another voice proclaimed maliciously: "We've seen that baby before. It's not hers, someone lent it to her!"

"What! He's not mine?" The mother was choking with indignation. "Who said that?" No one took up the challenge. The incident seemed to drop along with the little grey numbers clipped from the bread cards, into the cardboard box where every existence left the same administrative residue. The mother's voice needlessly shattered a silence composed of

murmurs: “I breed my own starving spawn, you witch! May your filthy mouth rot like a dead rat’s arse.”

At three in the afternoon, Miorzly and Varvara looked at each other in shock. About fifteen women were standing around in the store, their gimlet eyes boring balefully into its every corner.

The bread shelf gaped bare, and there was nothing left in front of Varvara but a pile of cuttings, enough to make a pound and half at the most, to cover two cards, satisfy two beings. “But we did have the full count,” said Miorzly in a hoarse voice. Varvara answered:

“I think so. We counted it all . . . but there’s a seven pound loaf missing.”

The manager was muttering to himself in front of his bare desolate shelves.

“Citizens, there’s none left. It’s not my doing. I give you whatever they send me. You can pass out of turn next time.”

Next time? When? What will we eat tonight? And tomorrow? Bread arrived only twice a week at irregular intervals. The blurred group of white, black and red kerchiefs, of shawls, of thin stooped shoulders, erect or broken, forever bent, wavered for a moment on the spot as if it was about to break into tears, shouts, and wild gestures or collapse helplessly into a pile of rags. A few recriminations were made, feebly since the women knew they were futile. Ah! When will it end, this life? Bread thieves, that’s whom they should shoot. “Where were your eyes, Miorzly—public offender. When will they throw you in jail to teach you your job?”—“Shut up, Klavdia! There’s no point squawking and groaning! The Five Year Plan will end when we’re all six feet under!”

Miorzly exploded: “Enough counter-revolutionary agitation citizens! Let’s have some consciousness here!”

He came out from behind his counter and advanced on to the women. The group moved sheeplike toward the door, straggled through it, marked time for a moment outside and slowly broke up in the cold light of day. Miorzly closed the shutters and placed the iron bars—quite uselessly—over the double doors. He would explain the matter presently to the Food Administration. Let ‘em arrest me if they want to, after all. Shit! I won’t eat any worse as a logger in a penal colony—it seems you even get a bonus

when you leave . . . (but he had children). After a series of cross checks summing up a mass of minute, inexpressible observations rounded out by intuition, ending in frighteningly precise telepathy, the light suddenly dawned in his mind. The carter! The cart driver had come in with the last load in his hands, talking very loud, his jacket unbuttoned—and the bastard had walked off with the bread in the flaps of his coat. None of this could be proved. But from that certainty flowed a need—totally physical—to murder. Just wait, you bastard!

Miorzly caught up with the cart driver at the tavern without a name, the poorest one in town, the one at the corner of Parricide's Alley among the last houses at the edge of the heath. A ramshackle roof, a grey front, window frames charred at the top by the smoke from a fire, a lopsided, green sign announcing only: BEER. An oil lamp was hanging from the low ceiling. Men in caps sat with their elbows propped up at all the tables, drinking and smoking in the deafening din of their own voices. "Come, Vanya," Miorzly said calmly to the cart driver who was sitting with his elbows on a table, his jacket unbuttoned at the collar, his big red head bare. "Come, we have business to discuss." The carter finished his glass, paid and they went out. "What's this all about?" He knew very well.

They went around to the back of the building. The end of town. Dusk was spreading across the stony ground, flat as far as the eye could see. The light was fading from one second to the next. Miorzly halted and faced the carter, chest to chest, with the calm of a slaughterer or a judge. "What's this about? Thief, vermin, bastard, son-of-a-bitch, you dare ask? Take your coat off, I'm going to knock all your teeth down your throat."

"Watch yourself," said the redhead calmly as he stepped back to remove his jacket. "Maybe I'm the one who's gonna pound your face into pudding, you son-of-a-whore fattened at the people's expense, you arse-hole of a bourgeois who eats the bread of others."

They walked a little farther from the building, side by side, scanning the ground to make sure there were no broken bottles, holes, or big rocks. Then, suddenly, they leaped at each other and began to fight. Locked in a frenetic embrace, their hot panting was punctuated by the same muttered curses: dog, whore, dog, whore, dog . . . Fists thudded against solid flesh,

muscles bulging, rage dominating pain. The carter was trying to free his right hand so it could reach the sharp Finnish blade in his boot—my knife in your guts, son-of-a-whore, ah! So we can't steal any more, ah! We're not supposed to eat—just let the kids starve, you dog!

Miorzly, every limb alert in that embrace, watched that hand reaching for murder with prodigious shrewdness, seized it on the wing as it clenched his face, fingers aiming at his eyes, bit it so hard that his jaws locked over bruised flesh. His head was filled with the taste of earth, blood, tobacco and horse-sweat. He gasped. Then the carter succeeded in mashing his testicles with his left hand. Under the impact of the double pain, they let each other go, almost surprised at being separated. The carter started to fall. You don't hit a man when he's down, but you can hit a man when he's falling, before he hits the ground. Miorzly kicked him in the gums with his iron heel. His satisfaction at hearing the broken teeth crackle like ground glass was so great that the pain in his groin turned to red heat.

All of this happened very fast, without any real importance. The cold night air brought the loser round from his prostration. He returned to his hovel, walking more steadily, despite everything, than a drunk. Anya, his wife, covered his wounds with ointments supplied by an old neighbour who knew healing recipes. For small cuts, spider-webs do a world of good. Bird droppings and urine (especially the urine of pregnant women) have precious curative virtues. Algae brought from the sea, dried and then soaked, are soothing for the gums. But the essential thing is . . . "Anya, my soul," explained the old woman. "Don't worry . . . If the moon comes up in a little while your man will be all better. I know some marvellous words to say, but they must be said at midnight, by the light of the moon, without a single cloud to disturb it. Give me a lock of his hair." The carter moaned. His face, in the yellow candlelight, was swollen and splotched with purplish-blue blotches like the faces of drowned men. Anya gazed at it lovingly, for the children were sleeping, glutted, she herself was no longer hungry, there was enough bread left for two days and she understood the price. If only they didn't take her man away and send him God-knows-where, to one of those camps from which they're supposed to return after two or three years. But do they ever return?

God protect us, deliver us. Anya raised the big, bruised head with both hands so that the old woman could pour brandy into the swollen mouth. The alcohol burned the cuts horribly, but warmed a powerful body. The carter opened his purple eyelids, looked tenderly at the two women, muttered some more: "Dog, whore, son-of-a-bitch, cut your guts out." It wasn't serious. His head and hand bandaged, he was driving his cart to the sawmill at dawn the very next morning—for the moonlight had beamed down clearly just before midnight.

Varvara, summoned to appear at the GPU Special Service, was received by Fedossenko, who sat behind his desk like a Buddha in a Security uniform. His skull glistened. Sit down. The Buddha continued leafing through some papers and, casually, without raising his head, watching her from below with upturned eyes:

"What about this business of the stolen bread in your store?"

"I don't know anything about it. The Manager's no thief. I would vouch for him."

Sprawled against the back of his chair, the Buddha appeared less imposing but fatter: a glutton and a revolting male. Two leather straps across his chest, a new insignia above the left pocket of his tunic. Indeterminate tone of voice.

"I know that the Manager is not a thief, citizen."

Varvara caught the insulting insinuation. Her nostrils drew in as if assaulted by a powerful stench. Watch out, keep a grip on yourself, don't say one word too many.

"Citizen Chief, I'm a Civil War Communist, wounded at the age of eighteen on the Orenburg front. I hope that's enough for you."

"I very much regret, it isn't."

"I won't tell you anything else. Will you sign, please . . ."

Varvara presented her pass to the Buddha, a little rectangle of green paper on which the exact time of arrival was marked at the entrance. In order to leave the security building, it had to be returned to the sentry, signed and stamped. Her gesture meant: Arrest me, if that's your intention.

I'll show you how little I care about the bread. The Buddha signed, affixed his seal. "The investigation will follow its course, citizen."

* * *

Kostrov was coming out of the adjacent office, the Deputy Director's. He looked worried, his complexion was yellow. No, he wasn't well. "My heart, Varvara Platonova. And then what do they want from me? I think they're trying to cook up a sabotage case out of this stupid business of the twelve hundred notebooks."

Kostrov worked in the Education Department of the Soviet. One morning, his boss notified him of the delivery of twelve hundred school notebooks which Moscow had been promising since last Fall. An event of some importance. Hold one-third of them in reserve, the rest are to be handed out to the school-children immediately. There would be approximately two thirds of a notebook per pupil for the semester . . . Kostrov made up the accounts and supervised the distribution of the packets without ever dreaming of opening one. They had come from the Centre in the wrappers of the nationalized *Torch* paper-mill. Three days passed. At the market place in the crowd of second-hand dealers, among the fortune-tellers and mountebanks, Kostrov flushed out some kids selling notebooks. But they recognized his way of walking with a cane, his air of an ageing officer suffering from jaundice. As he approached, they took to their heels. "Speculators make sport of me," thought Kostrov, "and they're perfectly right." He noticed, overhead, a sky of transparent mother-of-pearl. He went back to his office where there was nothing to do, nothing useful anyway, since next year's planned reorganization of the schools was obviously nothing but a huge joke. By next year, the present Superintendent of Schools would be assigned some place else or sent to prison. His successor would pay no heed to a future which would be out of date before it was born. He would order other plans in line with other directives. This time the Superintendent of Schools was waiting for Kostrov, smoking furiously, in the overheated little room in which the desk was

generally empty. He threw him a strangely angry look, snapped up the brim of his cap with the back of his hand and:

"You did quite a job on me, Mikhail Ivanovich. The Party Committee has me on the carpet. The case is being studied by the Special Committee."

"What case?"

"The twelve hundred notebooks, may the Devil take them and you with them. Have you looked at them?"

". . . No."

"Well take a look at them."

A thin notebook came flapping out of the Superintendent's briefcase and hit the desk with a snap. Sure enough, an oval stood out on the pink cover and in that oval, a portrait of Alexis Ivanovich Rykov, ex-Chairman of the Soviet People's Commissars, present People's Commissar for Post Office, Telephone and Telegraph, ex-member of the Politburo, member of the Central Committee, leader of the Right Opposition, which he tirelessly repudiated at congresses, friend of Mikhail Ivanovich Tomski, ex-leader of the Trade Unions, who repudiated him from every platform (but this—who could doubt it?—was in order to remain more surely faithful to him), friend of Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin, editor of *Izvestia*, who also repudiated him, repudiated Tomski, repudiated his own teachings of the day before, but assuredly in order to remain devoted to them in his secret heart. On the inside of the cover, selected sayings of Bukharin and Rykov recalling the mission of Soviet schools, the greatness of socialist culture, the wisdom of Lenin and Engels. On the last page, the multiplication table.

The Superintendent had a pock-marked face, a turned-up nose, and little, colourless eyes sharpened by worry. ("They're capable of kicking me out of the Party over this—and then . . ."). Kostrov smiled at him amiably with a wild urge to laugh:

"Oof! I was expecting to find a picture of Bukharin on the fourth page."

His amused glance fell on the Pythagorean Table, just at the spot where the following figures blazed discreetly forth: 7 × 7 = 94. "Look here, Comrade Driabkin." At first the other man didn't understand, not knowing exactly how much seven times seven makes. Slowly he calculated: three

sevens make twenty-one, twice twenty-one is forty-two, plus seven, forty-nine . . . 94? Mikhail Ivanovich said sarcastically:

"Deliberate sabotage . . . But that's not our problem. The paper factory is fobbing off its notebooks from four years ago on us. As for the sabotage of the teaching of arithmetic, Comrade Driabkin, I will write up my report at once and you will forward it. *We* will take the offensive, do you understand?"

To tell the truth, Driabkin no longer understood anything, except that things looked bad. Kostrov, summoned by telephone to the Special Committee, was received by the Deputy Director, a puny runt with glasses and a shaved head, tightly girthed by his tunic and leather straps. The runt, obviously modelling himself on Fedossenko, took the long view of the affair:

"You're a Trotskyist, Kostrov?"

A quarter of a second's hesitation. "No."

"That's odd, you only keep company with Trotskyists."

". . . I made my act of submission to the Central Committee last April 18."

"Ah! So you're with us?"

A quarter of a second's hesitation. "Yes."

"You never belonged to the Right Opposition?"

". . . No."

"Then how is it that you promote the illegal propaganda of the Right? Kostrov you don't seem to be double-dealing but triple-dealing. That's very dangerous, let me warn you."

Kostrov explained the twelve hundred notebooks—in sealed wrappers—the responsibility of the shipping department of the *Torch* central paper factory; the circular from the Regional Board of Education requiring them to insist by telephone on delivery of the notebooks and to distribute them immediately under the threat of having to answer to the charge of sabotaging the year's education plan . . . Kostrov explained and felt like laughing, for this whole business was childishly stupid. But he was beginning to feel scared. Fear clutched the pit of his stomach, a gentle choking pressure. It climbed toward his sick heart, it reached his throat, it

affected his voice. It mounted, carried by his blood, passed his mouth, clumsy at forming words. It reached his eyes, his forehead. It removed an invisible blindfold from the man's eyes and forehead and he saw.

He saw that the Runt had a strange head, at once that of a living man and a dead man, shadowy holes in the place of eyes, a thin mouth outlined in black, the chest of a hollow, white skeleton under his uniform.

He saw the Runt get up, beckon to him snickering, and lead him down corridors cut at right angles, through ever-increasing darkness toward cement staircases, grey, underground passageways, singular doors in walls bathed in a fog of electricity.

He saw the Runt walking jerkily ahead of him, limping alternately with his right foot and his left, turning around every three steps, without slowing down, to stare at him through the holes, now black, of his eye-sockets.

The Runt in an ordinary uniform, revolver at his waist, and others following him. Other Runts with the same jerky gait leading comrades who walked with feeble steps like his own—Varvara, Rodion, Ryzhik, his white hair rising like motionless tongues of flame. Others.

He saw a black ruler lying on some papers in front of the runty Deputy Director of the GPU Special Committee, and he read, even upside down, the typewritten text:

Report on the Interrogations of . . .

The Runt said "Of course your version is plausible, but all saboteurs have plausible versions. The most important thing, in my eyes, is that you are with us. I had some doubt about that because of the company you keep. But don't change it, Mikhail Ivanovich, we'll discuss this later. I'm quite inclined to trust you. How are you feeling, in general? Your heart? This matter of the twelve hundred notebooks is very troublesome, as you yourself understand. The C.C. and the Special Board of State Security just sent us circulars insisting on the greatest vigilance in the struggle against the insidious propaganda of the Right . . . and of the Left, of course, Kostrov. Anyhow, I'll try to patch this up. Nonetheless, don't bother to go back to the Education Department, you've been dismissed, you understand. Look for something else."

"A night watchman's job, for example?"

The Runt didn't seem to notice the irony at all.

"No, night watchmen are armed. Since you were convicted under Article 58 you would not be permitted to carry arms . . ."

Kostrov went through the door walking tall, but he felt he was staggering. "They're spreading their nets, that's clear, I'm done for—they're spreading their nets . . ." Providentially, Varvara offered him her eyes which had been sparkling recently: a touch of beauty graced her Mongolian shepherdess' face (the glowing trace of the face she wore at other times—purified, bathed in smiles, known only to Avelii). Kostrov took her arm in the street with a kind of gratefulness, as if he had said to her: I thank you for having those bright eyes, this slender neck, for carrying I don't know what joy within you. Aloud, he murmured.

"How nice it is, Varvara Platonova."

Totally involved in her secret happiness, yet lucid, she replied to their common thought.

"It looks like they're digging a trap for us. Let's be ready."

* * *

Alone in front of his window, Kostrov played interesting chess matches with himself. Capablanca against Lasker: Capablasker, as he said with the poet. A crow came and perched on the sill outside, right against the pane. He considered the player at length with his little round eye, a black pearl surrounded by a thin ring of coral. This match would never be completed. Rodion's footsteps were coming up the planks of the veranda.

"Explain the difference," asked Rodion, "between natural economy and feudalism."

In order to listen better, he sat with his elbow on the table, chin in hand. The chess board lay between them. Kostrov came back to life, a wholly different Kostrov whose waxy complexion and sadly sunken features regained an appearance of youth. He spoke better than he would have spoken before a class. He spoke as he had not thought for a long while, tired of himself, having given up making discoveries. He perceived a strange disparity between his knowledge and life, now that, for the sake of an

attentive young comrade, he had to express things in living terms. Rodion questioned tirelessly. "What is the relationship between the psychological and the economic? Art, love . . .?

Kostrov entered into vast digressions, rising to recite a stanza by Pushkin, to tell the story of Lassalle's great love affair, to define the Lassallean type of revolutionary, steeped in scientific socialism yet still individualistic and romantic, marked by his middle-class origins . . . And, suddenly enlightened by a flash of boldness, he made the white knight, threatened by the black bishop on the chessboard, make an extravagant move which upset the two classic games like an earthquake from the depths. "Look, Rodion! Capablasker is no longer a brilliant idiot obsessed by mathematical combinations: he's gone mad! He's going to win on both sides at once. That's never been seen before. It's because of you!"

Rodion, concentrating, received an affectionate glance in his eyes. "But art, Kostrov, art?"

"The origins of art lie in the gratuitous repetition of the motions of labour . . . Plekhanov said, based on the anthropological studies of Morgan . . . The dances of primitive peoples evoke hunting and war, which is also a form of labour. (These were truths learned from books, as precise as the gambits of the two classic chess games.) The work of art, dear Rodion, begins with the gesture you make to communicate a feeling—and thought begins with feeling. You are standing in front of a landscape. There is someone near you. You stretch out your hand. You say *see*, for you would like to give what you see, and that's the beginning of everything: you're a painter, a poet, a novelist, a sculptor, a playwright. You're a man who explodes boundaries. You live, for there are two of you living. The most beautiful landscape makes you sad when you see it alone: so you must think of other men."

"I am always thinking of them," said Rodion softly. "I don't even need to think of them any more, they're always there . . . The ones whose lives are worth living, naturally."

Their discussions took place in a tiny, neatly-kept room with sea-blue painted walls. Kostrov lived with a fisherman who was a member of the sect of Old Believers without priests. The woodwork around the window framed

white birches, a piece of an ash-coloured log house, an edge of sky. Kostrov had not disturbed the icons hanging in the corner of the woodwork over the head of his bed: a Souzdal Virgin-with-Child, and a portrait of Kalinin cut out of a picture magazine and glued onto a sheet of red paper, thus illustrating the craftiest of saints. Rodion left, charged up with ideas, reviewing principles in his mind and mixing them up, yet drawing inexplicable confidence from this jumble of words and ideas. He believed he now had a better understanding of the meaning of art, love, agrarian reform, imperialism. In reality he understood better that—after the Gracchi, the peasants of the Peasant War of 1525, Lassalle, Bernstein's revisionism, the victory of Soviet bureaucracy—he, himself, was a living man. The next morning he washed more thoroughly in the river, ate his crust of rye with an onion on the bank of the Black-Waters and meditated, squatting in the sun in a warm crevice among the rocks. Great resolutions ripened within him. "They're all mistaken, the Comrades. They don't dare to think. The epoch demands of us the courage to pass judgement. What are we doing in these prisons? Who will save mankind if not the proletariat? What are we waiting for when the proletariat expects everything from us?"

Letter by letter, Rodion deciphered the thesis of the minority of the Communist Left of the Verkhne-Uralsk Prison, copied by Ivanov at the SPCC, Special Purpose Concentration Camp on Kola Peninsula. He read the summaries of the *Bulletin of the Opposition*, reconstructed there by Ivanov based on the mental notes of Engineer Botkin. It was Rodion who brought Kostrov these insidious yet blinding insights. And it was Mikhail Ivanovich Kostrov, professor of Hist-Mat, historical materialism, author of studies on the system of property-ownership in old Kievian Russia and on the agrarian question in the Chinese revolution (Shanxi, Hubei), who, abandoning the white bishop blocked by the black queen, threatened by a black pawn, guarded by the black knight—the white bishop surrounded on the chess board with no escape—took his chin in his hand to listen to Rodion—Rodion who rose, eyes swollen with brightness, paced from one wall to the other, leaned against the cold porcelain stove and declared with an abrupt gesture:

"Put a stop to this ruinous collectivization. Maintain only those *Kolkhozes* with adequate technical bases and yielding good crops. Restore the circulation of commodities. Give up gigantomania in industrialization! Ah! Yes. We must consider the labour force as important as plant and equipment. Stop the deterioration caused by overwork and undernourishment."

"In the end," said Kostrov, pensively, "the Verkhne-Uralsk minority fails to push its argument through to the very end. They don't dare conclude that the old bureaucratized Party is finished for the Revolution and that the moment has come to consider starting everything over again."

Rodion restrained himself from shouting: "I dare!"

"That's right," he said, pacing the room with nimble, heavy steps like a bear in a pit. "Listen, Mikhail Ivanovich, it's time to understand."

He spread his hands—broad stubby-fingered and calloused—as if to place the obvious conclusion there, between them.

"*They* won't let us live! And it can't go on. We are the new party, even if we don't dare to want it. *They* know it better than we do. *They*'ll have to let us rot in jail. When they finally understand what they're doing, they'll start shooting us. All of us, I tell you. It'll be the black terror. How can they leave us alive?

"Listen, Mikhail Ivanovich. I met some workers from the tannery. They haven't been paid in six weeks. The special milk ration for unhealthy working conditions? No one's even heard of it. This month they worked during three of their five rest days because the monthly production quota hadn't been fulfilled. Do you know what the Party Secretary answered when they told him they couldn't go on? He said: 'There's plenty of room for loafers in the penitentiary brigades.' Can't you just hear him?"

The courage was fading out of Kostrov's soul after an hour's fatigue. He lay down on his bed, stretched his left arm up behind him and drew the coolness of the iron bed-stead into his fingers.

"Pass me a cigarette, Rodion. Don't be so quick to draw conclusions. The Party . . ."

"What Party? Theirs? Ours?"

Kostrov made a weary gesture, blew a few puffs of grey smoke up to the ceiling. Bad heart. "Rodion, almost all of us are out of work. That's significant. I met Varvara Ivanova at the Special Committee. They're implicating her in some business of stolen bread. Me, in a sabotage case . . . *They* must have received orders to cook up cases against us on the eve of the congress."

The chess board lay between them on the corner of the table. Rodion brutally pushed the black pawn. Lose the white bishop. Between them, worlds: to each his own. Five weeks without a letter from Ganna. For Kostrov this silence was now ominous. They're stopping our correspondence. The Runt, with his hollow eyesockets, his undead skull, the leather straps across his empty chest, was moving the black knight. "It's bad, bad." Kostrov was full of premonitions.

Rodion no longer thought about him, chess or theses. He sensed the approach of suffering, pain, rivers, hopes, gambles. It must be. It must be . . .

* * *

The group met at Elkin's late one afternoon. Squatting outside in the courtyard, Galia was scouring a pot with earth—and watching the approaches to the house. Sometimes she hummed to herself. Then she pursed her lips, preoccupied. What are they talking about with exaltation in their eyes? Whenever men's voices start ringing and their eyes begin to shine, it ends in trouble. It's the same with love: whoever loves too much suddenly forgets himself, picks up a knife, goes off into the night down the dark road. Afterwards, the old women tell you: "He wanted too much happiness on this earth. He let his pride get the better of him, he kicked up his little row, one, two, and the devil gobbled him up alive . . . You can get your tears ready. Here you are, pregnant."

To herself Galia answered them with a caustic little laugh: "You miss them, don't you, old witches,—those days when you used to make love!" Dimitri, her man, didn't love her too much. Wasn't it she who loved him too much, not daring to say so? Even telling him, teasingly "In fact I don't

know if I'm in love with you. I let you have your way because I was bored." Her whole face cried out the opposite. She knew it and she was glad of it. Loving him too much, she would never go off like a cat fleeing down the dark road. You're the one who will leave, Mitia, when they summon you inexplicably, and the world will be empty. She choked back her tears, scrubbing furiously at the pot. She would have to live bowing lower than the grass, more silent than the water. Galia moved closer to the hallway, her ear cocked. Elkin was talking cheerfully about incomprehensible things: the world harvest, Molotov's theses, the League of Nations, the International, the *Alianza Obrera* . . .

The five were discussing the messages. Ryzhik was chairing the meeting. Varvara was serving tea. Avelii was sketching birds on a folded newspaper. Rodion, seated a little to one side on the bed, was holding his knee in his clasped hands. He had something serious to say which had to be said but which got stuck in his throat. He had to accuse himself, without having finished judging himself. He believed he was right against all odds. Yes, right, yet certainly guilty. His clenched jaws unclenched by themselves:

"I want the floor."

Rodion spoke distinctly, without looking at anyone, and Varvara, stunned, set the teapot down on the newspaper clippings. Avelii drew a black line through a pair of spread wings. Ryzhik turned to stone, Elkin rocked in his chair, and scowled.

"I believe I have committed an error. I think I did right but it's still an error. Personally I trust him, but I had no right to do it, I know. I broke the group's discipline. I accept your decision in advance, I'm in the wrong, but I know I'm right. You understand. That's it."

"What are you telling us, you idiot?" Elkin exploded. "Explain yourself. What did you do?"

Rodion realized that he hadn't said it, it was still stuck in his throat. You think you're saying and you're not, you want to speak and you can't. You must. Clearly.

"I discussed the messages with Kostrov. He's isolated, he's one of us. You're unfair to him. I only spoke about ideas. I'm wrong, but I'm not sorry, it's only from the point of view of discipline . . ."

"*So*," said Ryzhik softly, "*so* . . ."

With that single word, five minds visualized something dark, something against which nothing more could be done. Rodion understood. The boat swamps and you're in the water, spray in your mouth, choking. Eternity was smiling down from the heavens the instant before. Now that moment is forever past. Die. It was a loaded moment. Varvara began a useless sentence which no one heard. Ryzhik implacably measured the consequences.

"When did you talk to him, Rodion?"

"Seven days ago."

Elkin kept rocking back and forth on his chair, whistling through his teeth. The chair fell loudly to the floor. Tea from an overturned glass streamed over the newspapers. Elkin, standing erect, let out a foul curse. He had struck Rodion right in the face and Rodion, painfully regaining his balance, elbows on his knees, both hands over his face, was breathing heavily. Elkin dropped down next to him on the bed with the same movement of his hands to cover his face, the same heavy breathing. A little blood on the back of his hand.

"*So*," Ryzhik said once more, "*so*."

"Elkin, you have behaved unpardonably. Like a brute. We agree on that and you do, too. As for the infraction of discipline committed by Rodion, the group will make its decision later. I don't think there's very much we can do about it any more. Show your face, Rodion. Here, at least, you behaved well. Let everyone take his precautions this very evening. No papers lying around, eh?"

Rodion went out into the hall to wash. There, he encountered Galia's terrified glance.

"It's nothing, Galia, we had a little scuffle . . ."

His ashen lips attempted a smile to reassure her.

"Come over here, Rodion. Here's some cold water."

She held the basin for him. He wiped himself slowly, with a sad expression.

"What is it, Rodion?"

"Nothing, dear . . . Midnight. Midnight in the century."

Yet he didn't seem drunk.

* * *

As Elkin dragged her along, Galia felt a shudder run through his arm with almost every step he took. She was watching Dimitri out of the corner of her eye, and she sensed that he was terribly upset: self-disgust, a bitter shameful anger. They were following the river, right along the water's edge. The sun, still high, was a golden globe above the woods on the opposite shore. It coloured the rocks sumptuously. Galia asked:

"Why are you . . . (she held the word back on her lips for a second) are you so hard, Dimitri?"

"Why, Galia? Is it possible to be different? You have to be a man, not a dishrag. Aren't there quite enough dishrags without me? You have to take hold of yourself with hands that are inflexible, remain firm whatever happens. And not spare others. You understand, don't you?"

All his tenderness was in the persuasive inflection of his voice, a boundless, stifled tenderness, in the final familiar *you*.

"I don't know," she said.

And after they had taken a few steps in silence:

"But if you want, take me in those hands. Try!"

The water, the north, the spaces—and Galia close to him, walking beside him, tall and lithe. "Galia, you are my joy. You are my adorable fern. Once, near Batoum—that's a sunny land on the shores of a blue sea—I went outside after a rainstorm. I walked on the red clay, walked, bitter-hearted, mean-fisted, I raged at the world. The bad days had already begun, I was fresh out of jail. And I saw ferns. It seemed to me that they had just shot out of the ground, in a single burst, during the tropical storm. Tall and supple like you, Galia, the ferns opened like fans, with their thousands of perfect little leaves. Proud, like you, my Galia, and like you they didn't know they were perfect, that they were born of the sun and the earth. I spat on my bitterness. I understood that I loved the earth. Galia you are my fern of the North. You have perfect nails, perfect teeth, perfect nipples, tiny perfect stars in your eyes. I love everything when I touch you. These black waters, these barren plains. These woods, these rocks, the green, cruel earth, this swarm of men who inhabit the earth where we haven't finished

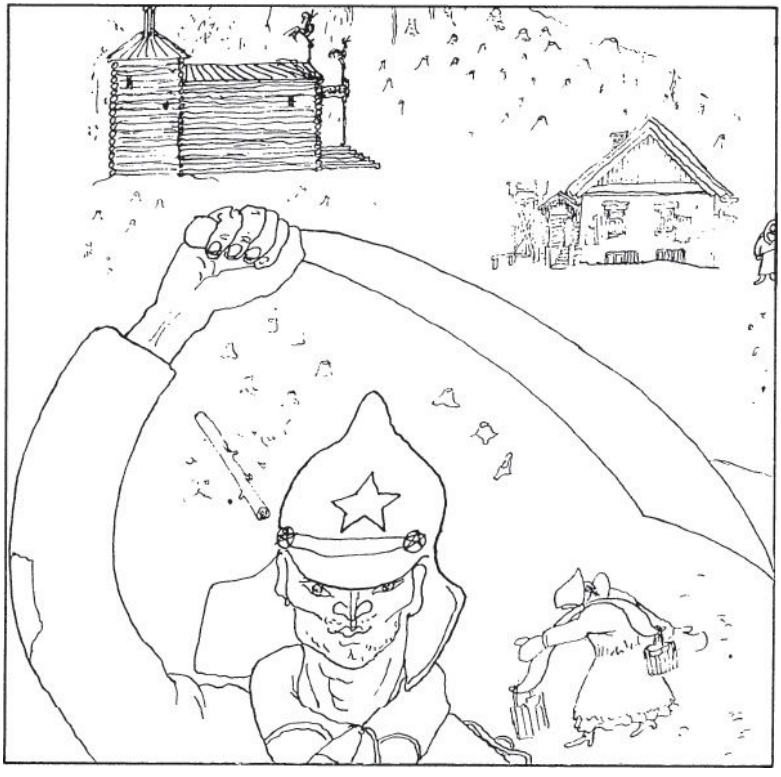
fighting. I love people, even the ones I detest, all of them, down to the last, down to the bastards whom I'd crush like vipers. I love vipers, Galia, because you are my joy, do you understand?"

What she understood better were his hands holding her and the light in the depths of his eyes.

"No, you don't understand. You are simple, as ferns are, and like them you can't understand words. You are my Galia and you can't understand. And I can't explain it to you. (He laughed a fond, caressing laugh.) That would be quite unnecessary."

". . . And I, I want you to talk to me, Mitia, perhaps I won't understand, but I'll listen. Try."

Dimitri held her close, kissed her eyes, the nape of her neck. He pushed aside a lock of her chestnut hair to graze her ear with his lips—and the trembling in his arms never stopped. Deep down inside him a secret voice was murmuring clearly: "Farewell, farewell, farewell, farewell . . ." The black waters fled silently by. A patina of gold lingered over the rocks.



IV. DIRECTIVES

It was not, of course, a meeting of the Politburo even though the leading members were present. (The others didn't count at meetings any more than they counted at this moment.) Nor was it a preliminary meeting at the Secretary General's office, since they had met in a small committee-room at the other end of the corridor. A single portrait, Olympian, yet forlorn, for it no longer meant anything, anything—that of Karl Marx. A single colour—the red cloth covering the table. Walls of abstract grey . . .

The Secretary General took his seat directly under the portrait, his elbow on the table and his pipe in his left hand, holding his yellow-brown eyes in check, a slightly ironic expression on his face and tiny vertical wrinkles between his eyebrows . . . He was wearing his military tunic as always. What kind of manoeuvre was he preparing on the eve of the Party Conference? Whom would he try to manipulate? The vanquished Left in order momentarily to strengthen the Right, repudiated by its own members, in order to bring round his own Left (the centre-Left, get it?) which was beginning to mistrust him? . . . Whom would he aim at with his heavy allusions, blunt-edged like dull axes? (Those axes no longer cut, they crush.)

"How are you, Josif Vissarionovich?" asked Klim, head of the Army, in a cordial voice.

"Well enough, well enough," said the other man with a friendly, shrewd, sidewise glance. (He considered the bowl of his pipe.) "The world is populated by idiots, old man. Difficult to work under those conditions, isn't it? And you, brother?"

The Director of Propaganda, a youngish man with a round, hairless face under a shaved head, dressed bourgeois-style in a grey suit which made him look like an American dentist, held himself totally silent, totally alert, for this might be a commentary on his commentary on a remark by the Chief, which was published that morning in the newspapers and immediately

censured, by telephone. The High-Commissar for State Security, seated right next to the Secretary General, had pushed his chair slightly back, perhaps in order to cross his legs more comfortably, perhaps in order to mark a voluntary self-effacement which allowed him to speak here only if questioned directly. When he did speak, it was in a deep, singularly persuasive voice which always said extremely important things like: *I take full responsibility—With sixty thousand workers from the Special Camps, it will be completed in two months. —Shoot four or five of them, no more. —This information comes from an Intelligence Service report submitted to the Crown* . . . He was a middling-minded man, somewhat pale, greying at the temples, with a rather open face, a high forehead, and a sad, thoughtful expression. A little cropped moustache above his lips reminded one that he shaved each morning, like anyone else, looked at himself in the mirror, like anyone else, probably desired a woman or women like anyone else, in a word that he, too, lived an ordinary life. He might have said quietly, in a detached voice, without any emphasis: "In short, I don't exist. I'm the seventh cerebral circumvolution of the Central Committee. I'm the eye and the hand of the Party.—The hand that searches. The hand that holds the handcuffs. The hand that pours the poison. The hand that holds the revolver in the service of the Revolution." And if he didn't say this, not having any occasion to do so, his whole manner expressed it, even his discreetly military bearing, shadow of the great men over whom he watches night and day, formidable shadow over the subordinates he commands in the name of danger and of safety, deadly shadow over the captives he sends to their fate in the name of a magnificent future . . .

The head of the government frowned: sparse eyebrows, a hard, churlish face with a forehead that bulged too much, eyeglasses that glittered too brilliantly. His head was a ball balanced on a white celluloid collar. This paunchy, wrinkled diplomat, who resembled a rich Antwerp diamond-merchant, a city banker certainly related to the Rothschilds, a banker from anywhere, perhaps eminent, excellent, sentimental, art-loving —perhaps odiously selfish, somnolent in his speciality, with a tiny spiritual candle burning in front of his strongbox . . . This paunchy diplomat who had once been a bold revolutionary, well-versed in theory and capable, in order to

save the Party's bank-notes, of risking his short neck under the gallows of the Imperial Police, said as he opened his briefcase:

"The Dungans of southern Xinjiang have received six thousand Japanese rifles. Klimentii Efremich, I advise you to send a few aeroplanes to General Ma. We should not let them cut the Urumchi Road, which is indispensable to our smuggling operations."

Klimentii Efremovich, Peoples' Commissar for Defense, a steam-fitter in his original profession, the brawniest of these ministers, corpulent, red-faced, with thick, close-cropped, grey hair, was thinking of nothing. Fingers lying flat on the edge of the table, he was staring at the well-defined half-moons of his fingernails. The half-moons, they say, are a gauge of the body's reserve of vital energy. A French journal has published a study about this, I'll have Doctor Levine order it. Although in the last analysis . . . "In any case, I won't compromise on either cement or steel for the strategic Baikal-North line." Urumchi, Dungans, Chinese Turkestan, Outer Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, the fortification of the Amur, the Vladivostok submarine-base, the new Kamchatka special labour camp, the report of the military attaché in Berlin, no chance to take a breath before eight in the evening! And shrinking half-moons as well!

"Maxim Maximovich, I'll do nothing of the kind. That question is political: submit it to the bureau . . ."

The lids blinked over the Secretary General's eyes, which were red at that instant, and two or three other heads of much less importance imperceptibly registered the blow: the Theoretician, Director of Propaganda, responsible for elaborating ideological theses on the eve of shifts in the line, of conferences, congresses, inner-Party ambushes; the agricultural specialist who alone knew the extent of certain secret disasters which he had succeeded in camouflaging as near-triumphs; the Georgian from Heavy Industry, obsessed by the problem of mechanization. All three told themselves with three slightly different mixtures of satisfaction and anxiety: "Good, there's going to be trouble this time. Klimentii Efremovich is angry . . ." He no longer takes it upon himself to send ten aeroplanes to Xinjiang: let the Politburo decide, let the responsibilities be shared. He's had enough of these little perfidies which consist in letting him make

decisions in order to hold him responsible later on in order to nibble away at his reputation . . .”

The Secretary General clearly grasped the meaning of this demonstrative colloquy in undertones between the head of the Army and the chief of diplomacy. Go on with your little skirmishing, comrades, we’ll see eighteen months from now if I won’t have broken your backs or made you as pliant as synthetic rubber. He nonchalantly turned three-quarters profile—pipe protruding, clenched between his teeth—toward Comrade Yagoda, Heinrich Grigorievich, High Commissar for Security, Peoples’ Commissar for Internal Affairs, and, so everyone could hear him:

“Henry Grigorievich, the Conference is approaching. The Right and the Left will be stirring in little corners. Lock ‘em up, eh, lock ‘em up! And keep me informed of everything.”

The Left figures in this statement merely as a counter-weight to the Right: and the Right is only mentioned for the benefit of one or two present who are, of course, neither Rightists nor Leftists but within the general line . . . The accent on the words *Lock ‘em up* has its importance.

The Heavy Industry man nods his fleshy, flush-faced head: “Very good.”

“Very good,” murmurs the head of the government with the smooth, round skull on a white celluloid collar—the man Bukharin nicknamed “stone-arse”. And Klimentii Efremovich Vorochilov, sitting up straight in his chair, fingers inside his thick leather belt, also says, clearly—for he’s a good loser and what’s more has nothing better to say—

“Naturally. Lock ‘em up.”

On this question at least, unanimity is achieved.

. . . It goes without saying that the forthcoming Conference will likewise be unanimous in all its manifestations, that it will approve the Chief’s remarks “totally, unconditionally, and from the heart”; that fifteen hundred frenetic hands will applaud until they wear his smiling patience; that a white-turbaned septagenarian Tadzhik poet will mount the platform to read, in an unknown language, the Ode to the Great Shepherd of Peoples who leadeth them toward the valleys of flowers, Oh our beloved of the centuries! Everyone knows the rules of the game. No surprise is possible. But no one can prevent the mechanics in the apparatus from thinking

about the things that nobody dares to talk about. And unspoken thought has inexorable exigencies. On the eve of spring planting it is impossible to leave in effect last year's decisions, which spoiled two harvests, or to leave the regional secretaries, who applied them, in place. It is impossible to move in any direction without appearing to be turning toward the Left or toward the Right; it is impossible to sign any decision which doesn't imply a tightening, a relaxation, a change, a disavowal of yesterday's decisions. Thus everything is a trap—an argument for the men of the Left, for the men of the Right, a threat to the reputation of the Infallible One, the danger of a crack in the soil. And who knows which crack will be tomorrow's abyss? Who knows where the smoking lava will erupt? Watch out, watch out . . . The Secretary General has thirty new nominations for regional secretaries in his brief-case and three decrees:

On the distribution of the income of agricultural collectives;

On the system of individual ownership of small and medium livestock within collective enterprises;

On the temporary level of stabilization of the relation between the commodity-rouble and the paper rouble.

These decisions signify a step backward from last year's decisions: concessions to small rural property, thus an evolution toward the policy silently advocated by the Right. Now the Leftist elements, the Trotskyists first of all, will raise their heads, denounce the disastrous slide toward Thermidor, recall what he said in 1926 (etc.) . . . The elements of the Right (and first of all the insupportable Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin) are going to say to themselves—without saying anything out loud, the rascals, for they keep quiet with boundless malice—that they had predicted this in the days when they still dared to murmur anything. A struggle on two fronts: to contain the Right, before taking away their last leadership positions, strike the Left . . . *Dia-lek-ti-ka* . . . The cadaverous Left, struck down a hundred times already, dispersed among the jails and exiled to the back-country, reduced to the vain satisfaction of a martyrdom unknown to the world . . .

Let's be materialists. The greatest danger is not the visible one, it is the one which cannot be unmasked because it does not yet exist in the facts: analysis reveals it lying latent among the masses. The important thing is not

what men do nor what they think nor what they themselves think they are, it is what they must accomplish by virtue of the necessity they carry within them. See Marx's *Holy Family*, the passage on the essence of the proletariat. The Left, at the very moment it seems done for, is brought back to life by decrees which, tending toward the restoration of private plots among the peasantry, must call forth tendencies within the Party inclined toward the negation of that private property. Even if these tendencies do not yet possess a material existence the very fact that they should exist awakens other, much more formidable tendencies, which negate them. *Dia-lek-ti-ka*, dear comrade. Affirmation calls forth negation and negation a new negation which is in turn a new affirmation since it is the negation of the negation. Consult Hegel's *Phenomenology*. And understand that the Chief of the Socialist Peoples is walking on ground which is ready to break open into abysses beneath his feet; that his practised eye sees hydras springing up everywhere, invisible to all others, ceaselessly cut down—for he strikes!—ceaselessly coming back to life . . . Understand that those who pretend to be his closest comrades spy on his slightest moves, but that the Chief, searching beyond men's real intentions for those they should have if they dared, suddenly sees potential traitors in his most trusted companions. And everything rests on him, the living keystone of the edifice.

Thus, at the Conference, in order to pass the thirty nominations for regional secretaries (and the thirty dismissals in disgrace they imply, which threaten three hundred influential local secretaries, three thousand less influential local secretaries, thirty thousand even less influential little secretaries—none of which will be discussed during the session), the Secretary General's report will have to allude to the clandestine activity of the Left—in reality supported by the Right, since Left extremism can only play into the hands of the Right. And anyway the Left is only a Left in the verbal sense; in reality it's a Right which is unconscious of itself. And the Right is only a Communist Right in the same sense; in reality it is an unconscious counter-revolutionary vanguard . . .

* * *

"Bring me the map," the High Commissar quietly commanded the Secret Operations Chief in charge of inner-Party deviations.

Somewhere in the four or fourteen hundred bureaus of the Repression there are large maps of the sixth part of the world covered with names, symbols, numbers referring to file-cards. There, Chernoe is surrounded by a circle drawn in green ink, with the aid of a compass for greater elegance. It encloses several names: Elkin, Kostrov, Ryzhik, Tarassova (Varvara), Tabidze (Avelii) . . . It is just one circle among many, containing a few names among three thousand names: more names than there are visible stars in the sky, it is true, but many fewer than there are people of the Left, the Far Left, and the Right dispersed between the Arctic and the Kunlun Mountains, the Tianshan Mountains, the Pamirs, the desert of Kara-Koum; between the lakes beyond the Onega in Karelia on the Finnish border and the Okhotsk and Bering Seas, daughters of the Pacific. It does not arrest the glance, the vague glance of an official absorbed by his inner preoccupation.

On the scale of the Soviet continent, what is it, in truth, but a mere *one* of those circles enclosing the fates of a few human beings? And these encircled fates, what is their weight among the hundred and seventy million fates, also encircled, encompassed by a shrewd glance? On the scale of history, of what importance are these little sufferings, this senseless resistance of micro-organisms in a drop of water?

If the Interim Director of the Department of Inner-Party Deviations had a touch of the poet about him, he would imagine himself peering down at the whole immense country from the height of an unimaginable stratosphere; but his technician's eye perceives on the map flexible lines invisible to all others. They are the probable curves of the pathways down which dangerous ideas are spreading. They radiate like stars starting from the Central Prisons for political offenders—imperfect isolators in which thought has still not been extinguished. From there they reach the concentration camps, the exile colonies, the shacks on the shores of the White Sea, the monastery on the Solovietski Isles, this forsaken house at the foot of Mount Ararat, that sandy hamlet on the edge of the Hungry Steppe, *Golodnaya Stiep*, where the author of *Theses on the Stalinist Counter-Revolution*, published by a handwritten review at Suzdal Prison, has just

been sent for three years. But during the course of a transfer, at the Cheliabinsk Detention Centre in the Ural region, he met two men and a woman to whom he explained his theses in person. Today one of the two men is at Yakutsk in the North of East Asia; the other is in Karelia; the woman, arrested again in the fifth month of exile, is in the Verkhne-Uralsk Central Prison. And it is probably through her that the prison came to know these theses whose influence can be found in those of the Left of the Trotskyist convicts' faction . . . Thus another star lights up in another prison. From here, the heresy shines out again over the whole USSR.

"Comrade Olia, I'm going to dictate a directive to you."

The secret service stenographer has pale, flaxen, pulled-back hair, a rosy complexion, and discreet, lifeless, steely-blue eyes. She crosses her sheer silk-sheathed legs high on the thigh, drapes her note-pad over her knees, straightens her flat-chested, silk-draped body, raises her mechanical pencil and waits, totally impersonal. She always has that absent air at work. Is she married? The Interim Director considers her for a short moment with the bizarre attention of a solitary man who suffers from liver-trouble, smokes too much, and whom a sad woman has walked out on . . .

"I'm ready, Comrade Chief," says Olia calmly in a perfectly anonymous voice.

"But is she married? . . ." The directive must be at once very obscure and very precise; enveloped in general recommendations in such a way as to make it impossible to apply some of its elements without infringing others. It must foresee contradictory eventualities, command definite actions while suggesting various others so as to permit effective repudiation of anyone who might carry them out. "Write, Comrade Olia . . ." The directive prescribes the immediate repression of all political activity in the Left sector on the eve of the coming Party Conferences, without, however, giving the deportees the impression of a campaign organized for political ends. In certain cases (not spelled out), it will be permissible to prosecute them for common crimes, without, however, allowing this to appear systematic and thereby justifying protests on their part. The Centre expects reports within two weeks. Particular attention is to be paid to revealing and preventing the spread of the Far-Left theses known as the theses of the Verkhne-Uralsk

minority, without however appearing to grant them an exaggerated amount of political significance in the course of interrogations or in any other way.

* * *

"Bring me the reports . . . What activity in the Left-Wing sector?"

The directive having descended one more echelon and one more storey in the building, the chief of the Secret Operations Service has summoned his first deputy, a man extremely well-informed about Trotskyism, about the group of the Platform of Fifteen (1926), about the Workers' Opposition . . . What do the reports say? They come in from every direction, centralized, synthesized by men who know everything that happens inside the little circles drawn in green ink on the map. The chief and his deputy are smoking, preoccupied; they can practically read each others' thoughts.

"The Verkhne-Uralsk Theses have reached a number of places. Traces of extracts from the *Bulletin* have been found in a letter from Perm, a letter from Chernoe, a book seized in Semipalatinsk . . . See, here, and here . . . In Semipalatinsk a split took place: seven against four, the minority in favour . . ." The point of the blue pencil indicates—at immense distances, on the outer reaches of the continent—the obscure villages touched by the contagion.

"Have you taken action?"

"No, I'm keeping things under observation."

"Ah! That's fine."

Arrests should not be made too quickly. Keep watch, let the sickness spread a little. Repression, like war according to Clausewitz, is a form of politics. We are here to furnish the argument, the proof, at the useful time: proof that the disease exists, that it is being contained, conquered for the moment. Proof that we exist too.

"Well, act quickly."

The first of these men is fat and has a voice like a breathless child. The two little red bars he wears on the collar of his tunic make him protective, for the time being. A few seconds' pause enhances the importance of what he is about to say, sitting straight in his chair and in a confidential tone:

"In reality, you know, the directive comes from the Politburo. It seems he dictated it himself. Be diligent . . ."

* * *

Comrade Fedossenko had not had time thoroughly to study the import of the principal passages of the directive passed down from Regional Headquarters, when he received an express envelope, brought by a motorcyclist who had just crossed three hundred kilometres of green plains, containing a copy of imperative instructions transmitted to all department heads: in short, the order to act. Fedossenko stood up in front of his desk. A current of energy ran from the back of his neck down his spine and into all his muscles (so prompt were his reflexes as a good servant of the State). Erect, he dominated his situation better. His powerful chest took in a great breath of air. This was no time to blunder or to be lacking in zeal! The enormity of the risk made him afraid of misunderstanding. Of being sent back to work on the Great Canal or of being permanently demoted to some subordinate position, to executing others' commands or to executing others, to the struggle against banditism in the forests! This fear fogged his vision. He went and bolted the door to prevent anyone from disturbing him or seeing him upset. Orders, directives, even more imperious than orders, must be read over three times, seven times, until you know them by heart, until the blinding light of duty shines within you. Then you march straight ahead, no doubts to undermine you, and the only risk is that of pushing obedience too far, acting too much, striking too hard, which is always less dangerous than not enough . . . As he was re-reading, faces appeared clearly before his eyes, faded, reappeared, and he broke off reading the better to see them: Ryzhik, Elkin, Varvara, who came from Verkhne-Uralsk (very important, that) involved with the young Georgian, Tabidze, Avelii. (They've been sleeping together for a little while—maybe we can get a hold on one through the other, but that's doubtful;) Kostrov, a vacillator, two-faced, on friendly terms with a woman who is an informer. Fedossenko was satisfied with himself. His unfailing intuition having anticipated the directive, he already had a hold on all his people: 1) through

unemployment; 2) Varvara through the case of the seven-pound loaf; 3) Kostrov through the affair of the twelve hundred notebooks, sabotage, counter-revolutionary intrigues, duplicity toward the Central Committee, since Kostrov had signed a declaration of repentance and allegiance. He had a copy of it, which he also reread. The reports of the informer, Maria Ismailova, the librarian who set down all her discussions with Kostrov in writing, mentioned a passage from the *Bulletin of the Opposition* published in Berlin once and the Theses of the Verkhne-Uralsk Left twice, notably concerning State Capitalism.

Fedossenko spent two hours with the files spread open around him, unravelling the skein of the plot. The central piece of evidence was a sheet of school notebook paper covered with Rodion's clumsy handwriting, about "L.T.'s praise of the workers' *juntas* in the Spanish revolution; L.T.'s letter of April 24, 1931 to the Politburo proposing a united front of Communists in the Spanish revolution, the failure of which might automatically cause the victory of an Italian-style fascism . . ." This paper was creased, soiled, marked with the imprint of half a boot-heel. The worker, Kurochkin, a poacher and wood-pilferer, had taken it one day, out of curiosity, from a book which Rodion hid under his pillow before going to sleep; and Kurochkin had hesitated, sensing he was heading toward a grave act. Kurochkin had split logs for a whole evening, heaviness weighing on his chest and head, to keep himself from thinking. Then Kurochkin had crumpled that paper with a violent hand and thrown it onto the rubbish heap. He knew, deep inside, that he would find it there again when he had entirely made up his mind to become a bastard. Otherwise, he would have put it back or handed it to Rodion, as he had been tempted to do, saying: "Rodionich, isn't this a letter you lost?" All these words were on his lips; he kept them there for several days, thinking: "No, I'm not a bastard, Rodionich." But on the fourth day, a calm decision overcame him. He went and got the stolen paper, smoothed it out with his own hands, wiped off the spatterings of dirty water and a muddy heel-mark, and went to the Security Department. For, like everyone else, he had a few little affairs hanging over him. The suspicion of a theft of fish-nets weighed against him: now he was coming in to do a favour, they would see that the government

could count on Kurochkin. Yet the words "Spanish revolution" filled him with a muted joy. He wasn't taken in, you can be sure! Nobody gives a damn about Spain, and Rodion no more than another, but they're not so stupid as to write "Russia". It was good to know that people were working for a new revolution in which all the grudges accumulated over the past ten years would be settled. Let it come soon, like a blizzard, and then the Kurochkins would show the stuff they're made of! At that idea, his jaws clamped shut and he hooded his eyes, which were flashing with sparks. Full of a resentment which in no way affected his resolve, Kurochkin brought the paper stolen from Rodion to Security. A subaltern, who didn't understand anything about it, filed it away. Fedossenko discovered it like a gold-prospector stumbling on a nugget.

"Elkin's the one to arrest, or Ryzhik."

Only nothing would be found at either of their houses except the usual newspaper clippings underlined in blue and red. Neither of them would say anything. Both would send long, insolent messages to the C.C., which he would be obliged to forward. Luckily, there are cowards! Without them, we would never get the better of the strong ones.

СССР

V. THE BEGINNING

When Kostrov came in to fulfill the weekly formality of deportee registration, he was asked to report to the office of the Chief. "Come in," said Fedossenko crisply. "Good Morning." He went on writing. Kostrov stood perplexed in the middle of the carpet for a moment, hesitating to take a seat without being asked. Then he sat down in the corner of the sofa and even crossed his legs. You're making a fuss, you want to impress me? We've seen plenty of others, my friend. Kostrov was feeling good that day, perhaps because of the weather, which was brisk, cool and mild: just right for his heart. Thin white clouds were fleeting through a clear sky. He discreetly opened a newspaper. "I have time, Comrade Chief . . ."

"How are you, Mikhail Ivanovich?"

His tone, this time, was cajoling. Something about that voice put Kostrov on his guard. Fedossenko's half-smile, his over-attentive look, all that meant . . . meant . . .?

"Come closer, Kostrov. Sit down . . . Your health? Your job? And how's your wife? No news for two weeks, you say? It's incredible how badly the postal service operates. Our people ought to look into that." (The Chief's double chin hung down over his stiff tunic collar: it made a disgusting little roll of crimson flesh . . .) Kostrov, as he replied, felt too talkative, too friendly, a little bit vile. He would have bet that the three missing letters from his Ganna were there in a drawer, having been carefully studied, and that this whole interview—after the case of the twelve hundred notebooks, after taking away the comrades' jobs, after cutting off the mail—was leading to some kind of trap. Roll out your big guns, eh policeman! Even with a noose hanging over his head, as in the offices of the Romanian *Siguranza* in 1921, he would have felt more at ease facing a mortal enemy to whom his demeanour said: *Yes, Lieutenant, we're mortal enemies. I would shoot you with pleasure. Today I have to try to trick you. You know it as well as I do. You're lying and I'm lying. You hang; I shoot—fair play!*

But Fedossenko was saying:

"Mikhail Ivanovich, I have faith in you. Among us, opinions are divided concerning you. Some consider you to be a counterrevolutionary Trotskyist who is very clever at lying, one of those implacable enemies whom the proletarian dictatorship will sooner or later have to destroy for the victory of socialism. I know your statement to the Central Committee, and I believe it is sincere. That was the only reason why I suspended the investigation of that nasty case of counter-revolutionary propaganda and sabotage in the Public Education Department. You know what it could cost you: five years' internment in a concentration camp. When the crime is blatant, I'm in favour of heavy sentences—for the psychological effect and the chance of rehabilitation. Don't you agree?"

"Completely," said Kostrov, choking.

"Besides, our concentration camps perform miracles of reeducation. What a wonderful phrase has been invented to express it: the recasting of man! Someday I'll tell you about the results I myself obtained among the work-gangs of Onega, with Kulaks, ex-officers, bandits, engineers, priests, religious sectarians—in short, the most anti-social elements. And a relatively low rate of mortality: six to seven per cent. That's why the Special Board has decided in principle to send only a very few people to the penitentiaries any more. They have become hotbeds of counter-revolution. Work camps! There's the form of detention of the future. You, who teach, do you realize? . . ."

Kostrov nodded his approval, politely, with his most hypocritical half-smile. What are you getting at, cow-face, *gendarme*, Jesuit? Ah! How to explain the fact that the Revolution has engendered these creatures by the thousands, given them automatic pistols, insignia, pictures of Marx and the *Works* of Lenin bound in red, instilled in them this self-satisfaction, this monstrous jailors' Phariseeism?

"You see, Kostrov, I'm talking to you as a comrade. Deep down we are two Party men. Your re-admission, I'm sure, is only a matter of time. You have the opportunity to be useful to me and to regain the confidence of the C.C. A very serious case is breaking here."

(. . . don't turn pale, or seem too interested, or try to appear too calm, or . . . Anyway, I'm in the soup now, thought Kostrov.)

"I entirely approve your not having broken off relations with the Trotskyists. Not that I share your illusions if you thought you could bring some of them back to the fold. There's no hope, as far as the ones we have here are concerned. Subjectively, perhaps they are still revolutionaries. Objectively, they are hardened counter-counter-revolutionaries. But in keeping up contact with them, you must certainly have been thinking of serving the Party. I have concrete evidence that a Trotskyist cell has been organized among the deportees, that it has a very extensive ideological activity, that it is in communication with other circles, that it even receives directives from abroad . . . The C.C. attributes the highest importance to this case."

"How is this possible? I . . ."

Fedossenko pretended not to have heard anything. He dismissed Kostrov's gesture of denial with a nod. The roll of crimson flesh between his chin and his tunic-collar seemed to thicken.

"Well, Kostrov, you know them. Tell me which is the most dangerous in your opinion?"

"They don't hide the fact that they are Oppositionists, Comrade Fedossenko, but as to dangerous, I don't see . . ."

"On the contrary, you see very well, Mikhail Ivanovich. No sentimentality, if you please, no intellectual hair-splitting. Which?"

(. . . He wants me to say a name, for to name someone is to betray, even though it has no importance—no importance, since I'm not telling him anything new, and so it's not betraying . . .)

"Elkin."

"Yes . . . and who else?"

". . . Ryzhik . . ."

"So, you consider these two to be the ringleaders, the probable leaders of the illegal Committee of Three or of Five?"

A man is walking through a meadow and suddenly the ground sinks under his feet, the quagmire snatches him, the mud climbs to his knees, to his hips, he feels pulled down by his own weight, the slimy earth sticks to

him, a vegetable odour confounds him, he foresees asphyxiation. And every move he makes, instead of freeing him, sinks him a little deeper . . . Kostrov protested feebly:

"No, Comrade Fedossenko, I said nothing of the kind. I know these men as former members of our Party who were mistaken about important political questions and probably are still mistaken. I really don't know anything about their Committees of Three or of Five, if they have any . . ."

"I didn't expect this kind of trickery from you, with all I know. Unless you're putting me on. In that case, watch out. I have merely deduced the most likely hypothesis from your accusatory statements. In any case I'm going to put our interview in the form of a written interrogation, which you will sign. In the meantime, your hesitations and your attempted retraction cast a curious light on your attitude. Go."

At the foot of the stairs, a sentry came up to Kostrov. "Please go in to the commandant's, citizen." The commandant's desk was in the guardroom, at the entrance to the building. There, fishermen's wives, pressed up against a railing, were bringing packages for their prisoners. A broken armchair was piled with dirty clothes which still seemed warm. Who had just been made to strip? Why? Through the window you could see carts passing slowly . . . "Empty your pockets," said the commandant, and Kostrov understood that it was jail again. Chaos. Something inside his chest broke loose, fell slowly, heavily. He emptied his pockets. The Runt half-opened the far door and beckoned to him.

The Runt had a strange head—at once that of a living man and a dead man—the chest of a hollow, white skeleton under his uniform, and he led Kostrov through deepening darkness, made him cross a courtyard over which the sky was opaque like a huge concrete dome, made him descend a staircase full of foggy electric light, opened a door for him, pushed him, with an almost friendly familiarity, into a sort of cellar which stank of straw, mildew, salt-preserves, eternally cold stone; slammed home the bolts, departed, climbed limpingly back to the daylight in his crisp uniform, with his revolver at his waist, his empty chest, shadowy holes in place of eyes.

"He's going to get the others," Kostrov said to himself.

In the darkness, the straw began to move. A human form emerged from it, extended a pair of extremely long hands toward Kostrov—hands which ran over him, groped him from shoulders to hips with a touch so cold, so light that it was like the brushing of huge bats. Kostrov, leaning over, began to make out a stubble-covered face, pupils in which a dark soul glowed feebly.

"Got anything to eat?"

"No." said Kostrov.

"What day is it? What's the date?"

"The 16th . . ."

"Ah!" said the human form, "already. Shit!"

It sank back into itself and merged with the straw, the ground, the black stones, the silence. Kostrov wondered simply if this time it was the beginning or the end . . .

* * *

The Runt, instead of placing the official stamp on Ryzhik's identity certificate, put that paper away in a drawer.

"Yes," he said, as if in an aside, "it's too bad, but there's nothing I can do about it. Citizen, you're under arrest."

Ryzhik was not excessively surprised. Deep inside him, a bitter inner voice exclaimed: "Finally!" His hard white head, carved with nearly geometric regularity out of petrified flesh, recoiled as he raised it. He looked at the puppet in uniform across the desk with undisguised disgust.

"Good. I see that that old swine Koba has remembered me. That red-eyed swine . . ." (He was talking to himself, but out loud.)

"What? What did you say? Who?"

"Koba. The chief of the ruling faction of the Party. The gravedigger of the Revolution. The swine whose arse you lick . . ."

The instantaneous release of a totally mechanical spring placed somewhere between his seat and his neck made the Runt leap up, beside himself:

"I forbid you, citizen . . ."

But Ryzhik also exploded, all white, shoulders heavy, back heavy, filled with a definitive resolve. And perhaps for the last time in his life—uselessly, preposterously—he said what little he said with such authority that the Runt sat down again.

"Nothing, you are nothing, citizen. I won't argue with the counter-revolution here. If one day I spit in its face, I won't aim any lower than the General Secretary's ugly mug. Inform your chiefs that I won't answer any questions. You get the point, I hope?"

He leaned violently toward the Runt, and the Runt felt afraid. Hunched over, hands on the edge of the table, the Runt replied with cowardly politeness.

"I will transmit your statement exactly . . . I'm going to try to give you a clean cell . . ."

"Member of the Party since 1904, met Lenin at the Prague Conference, ex-member of the Revolutionary Council of the VIth, VIIth, and VIIIth Armies," Ryzhik obviously had the right to a clean cell. He almost shouted, "Clean or not, I don't give a good goddam, it's all the same to me." But his will-power was too strong. His useless anger subsided. Everything seemed perfectly clear. Impossible to get on with spring planting without making a few concessions to the peasants. Consequently, a shift to the Right. The Georgian is going to sacrifice his underlings of yesterday. To cover this manoeuvre, repression on the Left (first movement), then a campaign within the Party against the Right (second movement). So they're going to manufacture "cases" and send the people released last year back to jail again —always the same ones. Since I've already done three years, then two: five, (seven including deportation) I can count on the maximum. The bureaucratic counter-revolution is rising with all the energy it has stolen from the proletariat. It has just achieved its victory and it will take long years before the proletariat begins to think, to move . . . And me, I'm sixty-one years old. Since Ryzhik had known all of this for a long time, this moment failed to surprise him, despite its inexpressible weight.

The Runt came out from behind his desk, tiptoed around Ryzhik, and retired to the corridor. Ryzhik's eyes, full of hate, followed the back of his blue-shaved neck topped by a small, round skull. Ryzhik picked up a

bronze inkwell from the desk, hefted it in his hand like a weapon, eyes hooded, mouth bitter. "No, really, not worth it . . ." ("It's not the right time . . . and when the time comes, I'll be done for . . .") He put the bronze back in its place and, violently flinging open the door, found himself face to face with the Runt.

"I've had enough. Take me wherever you wish. I don't want to wait another second. Let's go."

Impetuously, whether by chance or intuition, he turned the right way, toward the reserved cells on the second floor, and strode off. The Runt went limping along ahead of him like a jerky puppet. Only Ryzhik's angry steps were audible.

"Here it is," said the Runt, almost obsequiously, in front of a door. "Excuse me, citizen, but I don't have a better cell. We're too crowded. You'll be all right anyway . . ."

In front of Ryzhik the door opened into the stark whiteness of beyond the grave or of a limestone crypt. Yet it was only an empty room. He entered it, prodigiously free, holding his destiny well in hand, to be greeted by the familiar voice of Elkin:

"Hello, old fellow. Delighted to see you . . . So, we're back to this again?"

* * *

Ryzhik paced from wall to wall, and his voice bounced from wall to wall too. And his thoughts collided with invisible walls every four steps . . . Then, captives, they followed the same path in the opposite direction.

"That's it, Dimitri: an impasse. These things happen in nature when you're at the end of your strength. Suddenly a mountain blocks the horizon —and there is no longer any future. I was alone with my men, my horses, myself. Alone like a child. I stared stupidly at the little red-dotted lines of trails on the map. Then I stared at the mountain. I read off the altitude of the peaks in the hatchings: two thousand four, two thousand seven . . . If '*Death, Death*' had been written there, it couldn't have been any clearer. No way to cross over in the state we were in. 'Comrades, we won't make it. Impossible.' You understand: the animals exhausted, the men exhausted,

thirst, trails that climb, climb along the edge of precipices, through the dizziness . . . On the other side of the crest there may have been the most beautiful valley in the world. At that point, in any case, we could believe it without any fear of being disappointed since we wouldn't reach it. Behind us the Turgai Desert with the skeletons of Kazakhs and camels on its yellow trails—its stunted, thorny bushes, its scorpions, its sun of blazing brass—and the heights of Kara-Tagh, and the apricot orchards of Fergana. We were at the end of our strength. We needed twenty less hours of thirst to keep up the effort. Then anything would have been possible. At dusk, the hyenas circled within rifle-range, for they could already smell fresh corpses in us. Filthy beasts. That's exactly it, brother. Today I would need to be fifteen years younger to get over the crest . . ."

"If the end were really like that, old man, I'd find it magnificent. We would stretch out on the scorched grass, the pebbles, the sand. We'd be thirsty, hungry, cold, feverish. Our teeth would chatter. We would see the whole, green, cruel earth again in our delirium. We would still say to ourselves: Oh! God! How enraging it is to die like this, but how beautiful the earth, life, the Revolution! And in the end, maybe we'd pull through. You pulled through that time. All you had to do was cross the Pamirs. Today, we'd have to climb down through chasms of baseness, without maps or compasses, with little hope of climbing out. Maybe we'll still be there in ten years, arguing, while awaiting our hundred and eighth socialist prison . . . Who caused us to be born under such a calamitous star? Answer, *Herr Doktor Faust*!"

"Don't joke, Dimitri. Maybe *you* will be there in ten years, talking with someone the way you're talking with me today, but certainly not with me. History moves slowly, it only produces hurricanes every hundred and twenty years or so. Kropotkin gave that approximate figure for the periodic cycle of great revolutions, but that old Utopian didn't understand anything about Marxism. In any case, decades will pass before our Russia starts to move again. Think of this old agricultural country, of its old, exhausted, depleted proletariat devoured by new ideas and new machines, of its young peasant proletariat which knows nothing about itself yet . . . Don't delude yourself, you'll be living with a gag in your mouth a long time from now, if

you live, if that mob of *parvenus*, which betrays everything so as not to betray its belly, doesn't end up getting rid of you by drilling a bit of lead into your troublesome brain so full of scarlet memories . . . They know what we are and what they are themselves! There's no group more practical, more cynical, more inclined to resolve everything by murder than the privileged plebeians who float to the surface at the end of revolutions, when the lava has hardened over the fire, when everybody's revolution turns into the counter-revolution of a few against everybody. It forms a new petty-bourgeoisie with itching palms which doesn't know the meaning of the word *conscience*, doesn't give a damn about what it doesn't know, lives on steel springs and steel slogans, and knows perfectly well it stole the old flags from us. It is ferocious and base. We were implacable in order to change the world; they will be implacable in order to hold onto their loot. We gave everything, even what wasn't ours—the blood of others with our own—for an unknown future. They say that everything has been achieved so that no one will ask them for anything. And for them, everything has been achieved since they have everything. They will be inhuman out of cowardice.

"I want to tell you about my meeting with Fleischman. Yes, Fleischman of the VIth Army, of the Petrograd Cheka, of the General Staff Academy, of the Manganese Trust, of the Tula scandal. You remember how he looks—like a shaved rabbi. I had known him when he was thin, when he arrived from Paris in 1919. Well, when I was called for interrogation, in the inner prison of the Lubianka, who do I find waiting for me but Fleischman—in uniform, with insignia on his collar: a bigshot. That fat pig wanted to interrogate me himself. 'Well,' I said to him, 'you're crawling, eh? Up to your double-chin in sewage, eh?' In 1919 we were together before Yamburg, side by side in a flooded trench with a company of shock-troops made up of workers from the porcelain factory. Shit was pouring in from both sides, corpses were moving under-foot. Whenever we stepped on one, big green bubbles of nauseating gas came out of its stomach. A machine gun was cutting swaths eight inches above our heads. Those who stood up —the brave and the asphyxiated—were instantly shot in the head. I gave the order: *Forward! Flat on your bellies!* and I advanced. Fleischman followed me, setting the example. Our elbows were touching. Every two

yards we turned to look at each other in that sewer, covered with filth up to our eyebrows, and one of us would ask the other: 'Are you crawling?' and the other, gasping would answer, in a glorious voice: 'In the Service of the Revolution . . .' When they saw us stand up at the other end of the trench like horrible stinking mannikins, those quondam Imperial Guard officers must have thought the rotted corpses were rising up . . . Ten years later, Fleischman, covered with stripes and decorations, was preparing to interrogate me: me with my railwayman's mug and an empty belly. 'Still crawling, eh?' I say to him. 'Your whole reptilian life? In the service of what? Poor old fellow!'

" 'I'll crawl as long as it's necessary,' Fleischman answers me, thick-tongued, 'and you, you idiot, will die a useless death!' Then, in an official voice, 'Citizen accused . . .' So then I understood that he was in his element there, that from that point on it was his very nature to crawl in the mud of Thermidor, that he was even getting fat off of it now that it was no longer dangerous, that types like him were legion. Fleischman was still one of the better ones, for he had some good moments in his life. He would certainly have preferred something different, and deep down in his little soul, under the rancid fat of the high official, he probably retains some shred of socialist consciousness. I understood that after him come others who are worse, for they never knew what he has such trouble forgetting, never knew that they are greedy reptiles, never breathed anything but lies, immune to asphyxiation from even the worst stink. Those people don't understand either of us, me or Fleischman. They fear us as incomprehensible intruders in a world they are in the process of building. They will have my hide, and probably Fleischman's as well, now that he's fat. 'David,' I cried, 'stop acting your part. You're something more than just that. Let me speak.' He let me speak. In the end he was shaken to the core. We stood in front of the window like in the old days at the end of Revolutionary Committee meetings. 'Maybe you're right,' he answered me, 'but I still think the wisest thing is to keep crawling a while more . . .' "

"I bet," said Elkin, "that that confession didn't stop him from interrogating you . . ."

"Naturally. It was even on account of him that I got sent to Suzdal. But what else could he do? Since somebody had to do the job, it might just as well have been him as anyone else, right? That's what he said to me as he shrugged his shoulders . . . I don't know why I'm telling you all this, Dimitri. To each his own way of drowning in the deluge. I doubt they'll leave us together more than twenty-four hours, and I have two important things to tell you. Here they are: You must cling stubbornly to life, in prison or anywhere else, whatever the cost, do you understand? Don't get carried away in stupid hunger strikes. *Their* job is to suppress us noiselessly; ours is to survive. History is pursuing its course. What they sow, they will reap one hundredfold. When that day comes, we will be extremely useful."

"I agree on every point."

"As for the rest of what I have to say, I'm not asking your opinion. I've got it all thought out. I'm leaving. I'm finished. I've had enough. Don't object, don't say anything. You'll see I'm not quitting. For a long while now I haven't had anything or needed anything. No longer any need for myself. Anyway, I never needed myself. I used to tell myself: I am a human tool in the hands of the Party. Ah! what marvellous times they were! One night my throat was choking with sorrow, a thousand bells were tolling in my head because they had just killed a woman whom I had not allowed myself to love. Then I wondered if I hadn't somehow forgotten to live, and the answer suddenly echoed inside me in the middle of that mad carillon: we must forget ourselves so that the proletariat may live! How it lived in those times . . . Don't smile if I seem to be wandering from the point. You know, I have nothing but contempt for people who kill themselves out of cowardice or because a universe in the throes of labour denies them the little toy that would console them a while for their own emptiness. Despite them, I recognize the right to leave. There is revolutionary courage in shooting yourself. You're not good for anything any more, old brother, so leave. Your nerves, your muscles, your marrow, your chops still aspire to life. You'd like to take a little drink and stretch out on the grass in the sunshine, because you're an animal. To conquer the zoological being within you, if this is useful, then becomes a final act of consciousness. I think I'm ready for it. No pistol, unfortunately. It will take a long time, with a lot of

unpleasantness. No way around it. Keep still, I tell you. We don't have much time. I won't begin my hunger-strike until I get to Moscow, when I'll be sure my last glob of spit will hit Koba in the eye.

"Between now and then, and afterwards, I need your help. You're going to learn my last declaration by heart and publish it in whatever prison you're in exactly one year from today unless you learn of my death first, from a reliable source. Don't change a single syllable, for I don't trust your theories."

Elkin, who had also begun pacing back and forth between the walls (so that the two men were animating the cell with strange oscillations like pendulums gone wild) answered, frowning:

"Naturally . . . I'll publish my ideological reservations later. It seems to me you're right. Your departure will produce a certain effect within the Party . . ." (he rubbed his hands forcefully together) "a certain effect."

"Good," said Ryzhik. "Let's get to work."

* * *

Varvara was cutting bread. Faces floated by her in the half-light, all alike. They came and went, like the hands, with the hands . . . Hands holding bread cards from which she had to cut off the number 26. Hands reaching for the hastily weighed loaves of rye. Life smelled of damp rye, slightly fermented. The fishermen's wives brought in the smell of fish. A little girl clutched her three rations of bread against her chest and lingered. She pressed her whole body against the counter and looked up at Varvara with big secretive eyes. Varvara read something in those eyes. "Do you need something else, little girl?" Varvara was cutting out the next card as she leaned down toward the child, and the child said quickly:

"Galia sent me. They came for her Dimitri last night. Don't go *there* today. They're going to get all of you. . . ."

The secretive eyes brightened. The little girl smiled: "I don't think I forgot anything . . . Goodbye, comrade."

"Goodbye."

If only Avelii . . .! So love is also a bad thing, since it can push everything else out of its way with this unscrupulous brutality? Varvara felt a great cry echoing inside her—Avelii! Avelii! But her hands, trembling a bit, still tossed the bread onto the scale. Someone spoke to her and she answered; and if anyone had been watching her, they would have seen the skin of her face become drawn, smooth at the temples, her features narrow, her eyes grow veiled, her lips darken. For love must be pushed aside; if this is the way things are, if in times of danger you think of *him* rather than think of the comrades . . . They're probably going to arrest us all, this very day. 1) Destroy the messages. 2) Prepare the youth, Avelii, Rodion, for this trial. (They'll hold firm . . .) 3) Write to Katia. 4) Write to Moscow. Warn them. Change the handwriting and the address to prevent *them* from intercepting the card.

The rest of her day flowed by on three different levels. The automaton did her job, served the bread, didn't lose a single number. Behind her everyday mask, two beings lived their separate and intermingled lives: one thinking, the other suffering. It might not amount to anything: the usual springtime persecutions, three months to spend in the cellars of Security, perhaps a transfer afterwards . . . But what if they transfer Avelii somewhere else? Avelii! How to live without Avelii? That apprehension brought up an uncontrollable sob; Varvara swallowed it back with a mouthful of saliva.

"Hey, Citizen, I didn't get my full weight! What are you thinking about?"

Varvara returned to a present centred on the needle of the scale, added thirty grams of bread and murmured: "Next in line, citizeness," while thoughts as sharp and as hard as metal castings assembled themselves in her mind. "No. It will be more serious this time. With the Conference approaching, they probably want to concoct Trotskyist conspiracy cases to create a diversion. The leaders among the deportees will be sent to isolators —and it will be two or three years before we get out again, unless unforeseen events intervene. Avelii and Rodion may get off, for they don't like to lock young people up in prisons where they get educated through contact with older prisoners . . ."

"Let's not go!" Rodion proposed. It was dusk. They were in the public garden, on the deserted side from which you can see the old fish market. From there, blue slopes descended toward the ford where the plain on the opposite side of the Black-Waters stretched into the darkness. Varvara protested: "But Rodion, you're mad!"

"Listen to me." continued the lad. He thought he knew the trails leading north, toward the sea, but that way they would get lost and the deserts themselves were penitentiaries. Toward the south-west lay the railway line, every station of which would be a trap. On the other hand, by travelling five or six hundred kilometres to the south, they would be out of the high security zone. Passports? You steal them. Ten days' march through the forests and the steppes—with the risk of dying of hunger, and why not? eh? —and they would reach the Belaya River (the White Waters) and safety.

"And the others?" said Varvara indignantly. "And the Party? What do you think we are, Rodion? Convicts? Tramps? Never forget that we are the living faction of the Party . . ."

Perhaps she didn't say that, but it was just as if she had said it. Rodion clasped his hands over his knees, and his eyes wandered into the shadowy distance. He knew all of that, but he didn't quite understand it or no longer understood it or finally felt ready to understand something quite different. Jailors and prisoners, we are still members of the same Party: the only Party of the Revolution. They are debasing it, leading it to ruin. We are resisting in order to save it in spite of them. The only way we can appeal against the sick Party, controlled by corrupt *parvenus*, is by appealing to the healthy Party . . . But where is it? Where? Who is it? And what if it were outside the Party? The true workers' Party, outside of parties . . . But is this possible? We are the persecuted faction loyal to our persecutors because we are the only faction loyal to the great Party whose emblems they have stolen and betrayed . . . Desperately, Rodion tried to make out the comrades' faces in the deepening shadows.

"Listen to me! It's no longer true: something has been lost forever. Lenin will never rise again in his mausoleum. Our only brothers are the working people who no longer have either rights or bread. They're the ones we must talk to. It is with them that we must remake the Revolution and first of all a

completely different Party . . .” The comrades appeared livid to him in the falling shadows: Varvara, Avelii, heads pressed close together.

“We would run the risk of committing a crime,” they answered him, “by stirring up the hungry, backward, unconscious workers against their own organized vanguard, however bankrupt and threadbare it may be. By attempting to revive the Revolution, we would run the risk of unleashing the hostile force of the peasant masses. It is the Party that must be cured, at any price. What does it matter that it runs over our bodies, if this is in order to come back to life tomorrow when the working classes . . .” In the meanwhile, no possible escape.

“Thermidorians!” muttered Rodion. “Sons of bitches! Excuse me, Comrade Varvara. That’s what I really think of them, and so I have to say it out loud . . .”

“Thermidorians is enough,” said Varvara softly. “It’s correct.”

“No! Not enough,” shouted Rodion. “How do you say son of a bitch in Marxist terms? A filthy, humiliated animal who has been beaten, kicked in the belly, fed on scraps and is only good for biting poor people? You’re educated: tell me the scientific term. What would Hegel have said if he had seen this bureaucratic scum sucking the blood of the victorious proletariat? And Vladimir Illich, what would he have said?”

“I think Lenin would have said the same as you,” Varvara replied seriously.

Together, they examined all possible hypotheses, studied the line of conduct they should follow, concluded that nothing had been discovered concerning the messages, that a betrayal was out of the question, but that it was necessary to expect the worst, on principle. “Once again the Georgian is about to repudiate his past deeds, and he needs victims in order to manoeuvre the Party. We would be quite dangerous if we existed in the political sense of the word.”

At this point Avelii interrupted Varvara: “ ‘*If* we existed,’ you say? So you think we don’t exist? I’ve often wondered. We exist like a seed in the ground, like remorse in a sick conscience, but we are no more that . . .”

Prison already enclosed them. It made them feel as if they were suffocating, even under that vast, still-transparent sky.

"Let's not go in tonight or tomorrow," said Avelii. "Let them come get us themselves—those sons of bitches, in the words of Hegel and Lenin . . ."

"Yes, forget about your bakery, Varvara. They can divide up the bread of poverty well enough without your help. Let's breathe free tonight."

* * *

They agreed to spend the night in the woods above the river. Avelii went to destroy the messages and to get blankets, soap, and bread. Rodion said: "I want to see the town one more time . . ." What singing sadness called him there? He couldn't have expressed it in words. He strolled among the people on the Boulevard of the Soviets. On the movie-posters you could see sailors of the year '17, jackets crisscrossed with cartridge-belts, shouting out an appeal to the world. "What is to be done, little brothers?" Rodion asked them. He recognized himself in them, born ten years too late because of fate, which either exists or doesn't. Maybe that's not a problem any more: fate must be shaped with a rough proletarian hand, and too bad if I die in the process! At the foot of a red-brick tower, some firemen were leading their horses back to the stable. Rodion patted a powerful mare on the rump. The sullen redhead with bulging biceps who was brushing her down seemed like a nice guy to Rodion. A lantern lighted his face from below. Rodion pitied him for his lack of consciousness. To live without knowing, taken in by every slogan, to obey without serving the one great cause—I'd rather die in your coldest prison, sons of bitches! Rodion rested on some stones that had fallen from the cornice of Saint Nicholas' Church and contemplated Lenin Square: the little bust of Vladimir Illich forgotten in the very centre of that abandoned space; the three stone houses confiscated long ago from the rich in the name of justice, which now housed Security, the Party Committee, the Soviet—in a word, injustice. A spotted nanny-goat followed by her two funny little black kids was grazing in the dark grass around the monument. People were cutting across the corner of the square heading for the lighted windows of the Trade-Union Club on Comrade Lebedkin Street. Rodion admired the sky above the roof. As it grew darker, its blue became even deeper. Rodion sat so still that the goat

brought her kids right near him and let them graze around his boots. An inner calm was coming to life in Rodion, and the animals sensed that he was incapable of throwing a stone at them. If he wasn't thinking, it was because thought was ripening all by itself in his brain: like the sky growing darker.

The lights went on on the second floor of the Security building. "Work! Work night and day, you'll still be swept away . . . The ice breaks up after the long winter, the spring floods sweep it away . . . It will be beautiful when they overflow . . . Your files, your papers, all your dirty little typewritten verdicts, and your prisons, all of them, the old wooden barracks, sealed with barbed wire, the modern American-style concrete buildings, all of that will be blown sky high . . ." Rodion realized that this was a certainty within him. "Everything. Everything will be blown up!" The thought illuminated him. Man is unable to hasten the arrival of spring by even an hour. He must therefore suffer through the whole winter. But he knows that one season follows another. So let him wait confidently, his boat ready, his soul ready. And what if the time is snatched away from him? What if he himself is extinguished before the dawn, like a tiny candle flickering in the great winds of space? "I am that tiny candle," thought Rodion, who saw himself, alone in the empty square, separated from the comrades, unknown to anyone, with prison waiting for him, sitting on rubble . . . "Well, I don't give a damn. The sun will come up just the same . . ."

A dark group emerged from the door of the Security building and moved toward the centre of the square. Rodion made out an indistinct mass of ragged prisoners surrounded by soldiers holding their fingers on the triggers of their rifles. A dog was prowling around these men with his tongue hanging out: a tracked animal who would be thirsty all his life, a slave-animal, a police-animal trained by man to track man down. A killer beast. This group of slaves crossed the paths of people on their way to the club to divert themselves watching the misadventures of *The Lucky Cobbler* on the screen (he bought a lottery-bond, issued for the construction of socialism, and he won the jackpot, and the pretty girl next door discovered his tender heart, and . . .) Rodion's eyes were following the prisoners, their guards, the

police-dog—the only creature set off from the group with any distinct individuality, eye-teeth and pupils gleaming, huge thirsty snout . . . "I'll be taking that path next week," thought Rodion. "I'll be with you, comrades! I'm already with you, totally . . ." For he had no doubt that these captives were victims: the vilest are victims too, and they are even ours now that we have taken the world into our hands.

Eight o'clock chimed somewhere. No one else passed by. A little girl came to collect the goats. Stars broke through the deep blue of the sky. In the Security building, two windows went dark at the same instant; then the floodlights at the entrance came up. Suddenly illuminated, the sentry, weapon held horizontal at the ready, was pacing silently up and down his section of phosphorescent sidewalk with the regularity of a clockwork dummy. And Rodion had a clear vision of the machine that controlled this automaton: it made the lights go on and off in the offices above the files, it made the telephones ring, it made hearts (but not his, no! not his) tremble with anxiety. It disgorged the group of captives onto the little dark square, the ones guarding the others: the hungry ones and the ones carrying loaded rifles, and even the humanized animal with emasculated instincts who would never again make a spontaneous movement. Someone turned a switch and the little red soldiers began to move. Another click and a current passed through their skulls; they halted, lowered their rifles, clack, clack, the captives who were moving ahead of them crumbled into the grave. Another switch. Trains began running, presses rolling, drills drilling, orators clamouring: *Glory to the Chief! Glory to us, glory, glory* . . . like in Mayakovsky's poem . . .

Rodion, chin resting on his fist, faded into the night, once again absorbed in problems. Only this time he knew in the very fibres of his being that tomorrow he would be in one of the cellars of Security. Dimitri was there already. Old Ryzhik was there. Thousands of unknown people were there, living there, probably dying there, and he felt torn between a yes and a no which were equally bitter, equally true, equally necessary, equally hard. I accept it. I can't accept it. When machines begin working against man, you have to throw a bolt into them. Then they break down, they're nothing more than dead scrap-iron. We built these soulless

machines, so we have every right to destroy them, we'll build others. I, Rodion, know this. He straightened up, transfixed by a resolution like a beam of light. What are we hoping for? What are we waiting for? We're crazy with resignation! Our resignation is driving us crazy! Impossible to live this way. I tell you it's impossible, comrades! Impossible to die this way, unless they kill us. Nothing to expect, except from ourselves. "History," said Hegel . . . "History is something we make, we are historical, too, like all the poor devils . . ." There is no certainty that this machine will stop and crumble one day all by itself. It must be destroyed. Another revolution. We will make one, and in a very different way. I don't know how, but it will be very different. But first, escape from them. Enough.

He walked along lightly until he reached the meeting-place where Avelii and Varvara were waiting for him in order to spend their last night before jail together. From the hard earth beneath his feet, itself supported by the black rock, a simple energy ascended through his limbs—fresh, loving and stubborn, like a self-evident truth. He followed a narrow path through the woods, illuminated by the feeble glow of the Milky Way. But as he drew closer to the comrades the words he was bringing them—burning winged words—lost their persuasive power; nothing was left of them but ordinary words, which other words could easily refute:

"Marxist thinking, Rodion, must be objective. This dictatorship which is no longer anything but violence and lies directed against the proletariat, is still proletarian, in spite of itself, because it maintains the property-relations established by the October Revolution . . ."

Rodion repressed a sort of exasperation. Am I doomed never to understand? Never to know? Yet a triumphant confidence penetrated his limbs. He could make out Varvara and Avelii lying together between the mossy roots of a pine tree. Two imperceptible faces which he could barely glimpse, surmising them rather, so close that their breath was intertwined. The woman's oddly tender voice offered him bread. "Give it here," he answered gaily, and his hands made a game of groping for the hand which held out a crust of rye in the night. His eyes were getting used to the dark, which was velvety beneath the spreading branches of the tree. A vague phosphorescence of starlight must have penetrated that far, for Rodion was

suddenly sure he could see Varvara's smooth, narrow face on which—without a smile—a kind of beatitude was floating. Avelii's profile was burrowed between the woman's cheek and the back of her neck, in her warm flesh and hair. The silence went on forever. A minute passed, and it grew darker still, the darkness of an abyss. To Rodion, the earth felt frosty, the bread bitter, the dome of boughs oppressive. Avelii and Varvara lying on the ground were talking softly to each other about prison, about life, about love, about the proletariat, about prison. For a moment, Rodion lent an ear to their murmurings: it was excruciating . . . Then he went to lie down a few yards away on the cold moss where he could see a shred of sky between the tops of the pines. Faint rays linked each star to all the others. They formed a web of mysterious light. Where did the night end, where did the light begin? Where did light end, where did night begin? Rodion fell asleep with his eyes open.

* * *

The next day Avelii and Varvara descended into a subterranean world with which they were already familiar, where people lived like larvae in a kind of slow delirium. The windows—for the cellars reached ground-level—were crisscrossed over with barbed wire and were missing half their panes: whatever glass remained was covered with the blackened dust of the years. Twelve women here, seventeen men over there, bathed in the same animal warmth, breathed the same stale odour of defecation, killed time with the same tales of misfortune. The women took turns lying down to sleep on planks which stank of bedbugs. When Varvara's turn came, she had to share with a thin fisherman's wife with sharp cheekbones, accused of speculating, and an old woman in a black kerchief, accused of witchcraft and counter-revolutionary talk. The first night, the latter asked her: "Would you like me to pray for you a little, my dove?"

"No," said Varvara, "thank you. I'm not religious."

"Then not for you, for your boyfriend," the religious woman insisted. "My heart feels he is in need of it . . ."

"If you wish," answered Varvara, shrugging her shoulders, but with a pang of irritation . . .

Avelii lived among thieves: local people, clerks from the cooperatives, fishermen, special deportees, and a pickpocket from Tiflis—a young vagabond who told complicated stories artistically:

"Part One: *Love*. Part Two: *The Tragic Surprise*. Part Three: *Hope and Despair*. There'll be three more parts tomorrow, comrades and citizens, for those among us who aren't sent out tonight on a free tour of the natural planetarium from which no one has ever returned. *Amen*!"

These allusions were aimed at some gloomy young fellows against whom he seemed to have a personal grudge. They were threatened with capital punishment for having, on numerous occasions during moonless nights, visited the stockrooms of the cooperatives reserved for Party and Security officials.

The wandering pickpocket knew the seamy side of every big city, the nightclubs of the Maidan in Tiflis, marked cards, cocaine, the heavily made-up girls, naked under their flowered print dresses, who wander the Krestchatiki on the heights of Kiev, a fabulous town, and who make love in the bushes for five roubles, three roubles when you're one of the boys, and for free when you're fresh out of jail! He knew the thieves' dens around the Smolensk Market in Moscow, the girls along Neglinaya Street who sell themselves on the sidewalk just across from the new buildings of the State Bank, the interesting parts of Ligovka and Pushkin Streets in Leningrad, haunted by real bandits in caps, like Gold-Tooth-Kolia, One-Leg-Artem, and Puzaty-Chaitan (the Pot-Bellied Clipper): "Got shot, that brother, a little while back. Was really too fat to hide himself nowadays when everybody's thin. He really couldn't pass himself off as a high-paid technician. Yet he sure was a real technician: he would have disassembled and sold off the turbines of the Dnieprostroy one piece at a time . . ." The light-fingered vagabond took a liking to Avelii " 'cause you're sincere, and you deserve some credit for taking a trip on this filthy boat for your own pleasure . . . Some night I'll tell you, just you, how sweet the girls are in those thieves' dens. Ah! You'll see, it's like a story . . ."

And that was prison, like a story, that hubbub of men, that motley collection of flesh-and-blood shadows, that heart-to-heart, that flesh-to-flesh, that fear without fear, hunger gnawing your innards, incipient scurvy making your teeth wobble in your gums. Most of the prisoners were so weak they no longer even volunteered for soup detail, which was done twice a day: two streets to cross and the whole yard of the Security building . . . Avelii went regularly in search of a unique joy which was enough to fill his days, his nights, even his sleep. For it took him past Varvara's prison and, in one corner of a broken window-pane, Varvara's eyes would be waiting for him, calm, illuminated by a midnight sun.

* * *

Fedossenko had fourteen days to put his case together. Eighteen at the most, but then his report would not be ready in time to be mentioned in the monthly bulletin of the Security Department. He was well aware of the fact that the case would make no sense if it were completed too late to be utilized in the preparation of the Party Conference. The rules demanded that the dossier include formal evidence of guilt—confessions or accusatory depositions—so that the responsibility of the political police to the Party Control Commission would be covered. The Rodion document would be worthless unless it were confirmed by at least one deposition. To make matters worse, Rodion was hiding in town or in the woods. They would catch him soon enough, stubborn like the others.

Ryzhik and Elkin were refusing to answer any questions, unless presented with specific detailed accusations. They were demanding to be transferred to Moscow. In the meantime, they were writing to the Central Control Commission of the Party. Their epistles, which Fedossenko read even though he didn't have the right to, were full of cold brutality. They followed their signatures with brief summaries of services rendered to the Party during the terrible years, and that alone contained the most revolting reproach. Further, "having long ago foreseen that the mediocre Asiatic Bonaparte of whom you are the mindless unscrupulous lackeys would be led to liquidate the Party of the proletariat," they quoted the platform of

the Opposition, the decisions of Congresses, the Party statutes and the writings of Lenin, concluding with blasphemous apostrophes like this: "What more would you do. Koba Djugashvili Stalin, the Cain of tomorrow, what more would you do if, like the *agent provocateur* Azev, you were a mere tool of the bourgeois police scum? You were kicked out of the Party in 1907 for pushing it into highway robbery; you were an opportunist in 1917, an opportunist in 1923, slapped down by Lenin in his last letter, an opponent of industrialization until 1926, an apologist for the rich peasantry in 1926, an accomplice of Chiang Kaishek in 1927, responsible for the useless Canton massacre, the harbinger of Fascism in Germany, the organizer of famine, the persecutor of proletarian Leninists . . ." Ryzhik had written these lines—and many more vehement lines—in his impersonal hand, every letter etched deeply into the grey paper. With each sentence, as he wrote, Ryzhik had leaped to his feet and paced around his cell, gesticulating. Aloud, he harangued the Other: "Koba! Koba! You scoundrel! What have you done to the Party? What have you done to our iron cohort? You're as supple as a noose, lying to us at every Congress, every Politburo meeting, bastard, bastard, bastard . . ." Ryzhik collided with the wall, pursuing the Other, the Powerful One, who backed away from him with little steps in his shiny boots, the little red flag of the Central Executive pinned over the right breast of his blue uniform: the Other of 1919, that disquieting oriental non-com with a narrow, swarthy face, who had nothing to offer the Revolution but his mountaineer's stern will and his jealous mind, always dominated by events or by clearer minds—and henceforth bitter, already weighed down by suspicion and resentment, armed with deceit. And the Ryzhik of today, who was no longer the same man as in the days of their fraternal encounters in Tsaritsyn, full of confidence and danger, when they were setting the world aflame together, but this old man with a bloodless complexion, a grey mouth, wearing a fur jacket in the middle of summer, shivering from time to time—this old man kept harassing him uselessly: "Will you answer me at last? Who brought you food and ammunition at the eleventh hour? Who? Ah! Now you want us all to drop dead in your prisons . . ." Ryzhik stopped short in front of the dirty

white wall and read a mysterious little inscription written in pencil by a semi-literate hand:

Prokofii Velochkin
fisherman
so young
May God rest his soul

"And this fellow, this Prokofii, what have you done with him? And all his brothers?"

Ryzhik went back to the desk, jaws clenched, and added a sentence to the epistle—which the other man, in his Kremlin, would certainly read—with shame and spite . . .

. . . Now Fedossenko, reading it, was overcome by confusion and anxiety. *They* would know that he had read this formidable text. And how, indeed, could he forget it? They would know that he would never forget it. Certain phrases stood out, stuck in his brain in spite of himself, like hidden nails, clinging to the venerated image of the Chief, deforming it, besmirching it. The poison of counter-revolution was insinuating itself into his brain—but the worst, the irreparable part, was that *they* would know it . . . He sealed the envelope containing the two appeals: "Forwarded to the CCC of the Party without examining the contents, in conformity with the regulation dated . . ." Eh! Who would believe him? Messages from prisoners were handed in unsealed.

Fedossenko had a decent cell fixed up for Ryzhik, with a desk, a chair, a bed, two odd volumes of Lenin's *Works* . . . "Just wait a little until I get the shadow of evidence against you, and you'll see how much your titles impress me. I'll give you a taste of straw, black stone, and salt-fish soup." Through a supreme touch of cleverness in his villainy, Ryzhik was succeeding in compromising him: him, a man unshakably loyal to the general line, pure in every thought, devoted to the point of death to the Chief—to "Koba, the organizer of famine, the harbinger of Fascism in Germany . . ." Fedossenko muttered vile curses under his breath at the idea that this repulsive epithet had clung, all by itself, in his mind, to the exalted image of . . .

Comrade Knapp, the District Chief, Fedossenko's superior, entered familiarly without knocking. "Well, that difficult case? We have so little time, Alexei Alexeich . . ." Knapp was bent and cave-chested with a shrivelled, wrinkled head tottering over a crumpled scare-crow neck supported by the stooped shoulders of an old consumptive. Even the lenses of his *pince-nez* glasses were grey. He was rarely seen: he gave his underlings free reign, himself absorbed in the composition of his reports to the Centre, which he wrote in the idiosyncratic language of a former German prisoner. This time he was friendly, chatting of this and that. "When you're finished, Alexei Alexeich, we'll take a nice hunting trip together . . . hmm . . . hmm . . ." Fedossenko felt his opportunity taking shape. Knapp gave him only one suggestion, but when he made it, he assumed his official voice—neutral, matching the grey reflections of his glasses: "Naturally, the proceedings must be prompt, efficient, and entirely regular . . ."

Knapp withdrew with light footsteps. He had forgotten the very memory of the little file clerk at the Nuremburg Town Hall, Gottfried Knapp, member of the Social-Democratic Workers' Party, who in 1910 was saving his money to buy a suite of Tietz furniture, before the mobilizations, the bombings, the devastations, the requisitions, the Volga, the Ural, Tashkent —in a word the Year One Thousand. He demanded an extremely conspicuous zeal from his subordinates, in order that it should be noticed. What, indeed, is the use of unnoticed zeal? And life is so tiring: let's keep our troubles to a minimum. He never bothered anyone, being himself relegated to minor positions in the North on account of his irrational attachment to Clara Zetkin, who was connected with the German Right—Brandler, Thalheimer, designated as unstable elements in the International and ultimately expelled. From time to time he went hunting. The Ford would deposit him at the edge of a thicket, which he entered resolutely, preceded by his dog. Two orderlies would wait for him in the middle of the living silence of the forest. Knapp strode along for a half-hour, barely straying from a straight line. He penetrated the silence, contemplated a tall anthill, smiled with all his yellow teeth at the dog, who came back to inform him, with frisking and tail-wagging, that they were approaching a burrow. "Not yet, my friend, not yet." The animal looked at him

affectionately, like no one else on earth. Knapp began whistling through his teeth, louder and louder, until he filled the forest with uninterrupted, enchanted harmonies . . . If a well-aimed shot had killed him during one of these moments, he would have died far above himself, far beyond himself.

Knapp wanted to interrogate Elkin, from whom Fedossenko had got nothing more than a few annoying jokes. "We are among old Party members, Comrade Elkin . . ."

"Really, Comrade Kneppe . . ."

"Excuse me, it's Knapp . . ."

"No, Kneppe, if you please, esteemed Comrade. I would be unable to pronounce Knapp, for I used to know a fawning dog who bore that name . . ."

Elkin exuded insolence. Kneppe shook his head and grimaced. "The old dead rat," thought Elkin, with a joyful expression.

"Do you have any statements to make?"

"No."

"Any complaints?"

"Yes indeed. A pile of them, which you must have received in written form. Your establishment is hardly on par with socialism, citizen chief. Beginning with the bedbugs."

"I know. Do you think that we are on par with socialism, you and I?"

"Me, yes. You, no. I doubt that you are one step above the police of the Empire . . ."

Kneppe threw him a vague look. The replies of this man of the Year Eighteen, pulled out of a cell of the Year Thirty-Four, reminded him in a ridiculous way of his youth, of the little roving Chekas, of days and nights of danger, of an enthusiasm sure of itself, sure of holding the world—and long since erased from his soul . . .

"A strange creature," he said between his teeth, wearily. "Very well. Goodbye."

"Isn't it tiresome, all these useless formalities, Comrade Kneppe?" added Elkin with the most hurtful condescension he could summon.

Rodion's arrest didn't add anything new. They knew perfectly well that he would turn himself in, for the Opposition is disciplined: you hold them all, the ones through the others . . . He did, in fact, come. Greeted by a sharp "What do you want?" from the Runt, the lad said: "I've come to ask you for news of my comrades."

"Why they're fine. Everyone is fine in our establishment," answered the Runt who, after all, perhaps even believed it. "Anyway, you're going to see for yourself . . ." He led Rodion to an isolation-cell, in a cellar with walls of bare black stone. A perpetual twilight descended through a grilled ventilator. Above, outside, a sentry paced by; the faint sound of footsteps announced passers-by whose unlined shadows blocked the gloomy grey light for a second.

"You see, citizen," said the Runt. "You have fresh air."

* * *

By the time he had lost ten days, Fedossenko was nearly out of his mind. Even Kostrov was resisting, despite his declarations of loyalty, despite his sick heart, the lack of news from his wife and his daughter, despite the filthy cell where he was kept, alone with a miserable wretch who lay in his own excrement. He looked older every day—hirsute, jaundiced, puffy-faced, tortured by a sty in his right eye. He spent his days sprawled in the straw, as far away from the other fellow as he could get, moving as little as possible to conserve his failing strength. Fedossenko had him brought to his office one last time. "This time I'll break him, or the case is wrecked and my promotion with it."

"Sit down, Kostrov. Ah! You don't look well. I'm sorry for you. If I treat you harshly, it's because I have orders. When the Republic is going through a crisis like this, it's no time to coddle two-faced people. We treat declared enemies better: they deserve a certain amount of respect and then, with them, we know where we stand. Maybe they'll never get out of here, but at least we can give them the only ventilated cell, right?"

"Kostrov, I'm appealing to you for the last time, in your own interest. Understand me clearly: the chance I'm offering you will be your last. Just

declare to me: I'm a Trotskyist—and refuse to answer. You'll get better treatment right away, I'll close the investigation, and I'll send you the doctor first thing tomorrow. That admission is all I want from you. Naturally, you will be treated with increased rigour for having deceived us for so long. But you're not afraid of jail, I know that."

(This would have been ideal, a blank check for Fedossenko; the un-hoped for advantage of unmasking an Oppositionist who had concealed himself for years, in short a master-stroke.)

"You're shaking your head? You refuse? Well then I want to try to believe you. I'm speaking to you as a Party comrade. I am at my post, a Bolshevik like yourself. They tortured you in Romania? They stabbed me in Transcaspia. We survive for the same cause, you and I. It's for the socialist fatherland that we are here. Go ahead and smoke. Take the whole pack, you can take it with you. In a little while I'll give you some good news about your wife and child. But before questioning you, I'm going to share some secrets with you . . ."

Kostrov was coming out of his annihilation. Even if some new trap was being set for him, at least this voice had a human accent. And it was speaking truly: we are members of the same Party. Distantly, strangely shrunken, the images of Ganna and Tamarochka passed through his mind. Alive, both of them. Tiny luminous particles coursed through his veins. Fedossenko enveloped him in a confidential voice. "You have no idea what is going on in the countryside. You think the resistance of the peasantry to collectivization has been overcome? Come now! Listen to a few statistics about livestock, crops and social crimes in the countryside—unpublishable statistics . . ." Here Kostrov, interested, asked a question. Indeed, the gravity of the situation surpassed expectations. "How the newspapers lie! (*An admission that didn't make anything better.*) Furthermore, the war-preparations of Japan and Germany, the state transportation system, the gold-reserve situation, the persistent sabotage in the Donetz basin . . . Kostrov can you now see the state we're in?"

Kostrov, completely alert now, said: "Yes."

"Danger everywhere. The power of the proletarian State undermined in its most vital functions and the impossibility of publishing these facts,

which would disarm all the oppositions, for the Chief—forget his personality, forget theoretical disputes and events which at this point belong only to history—remains under the circumstances the sole rallying point for the forces of the Party. His personal authority is our principal chance for salvation. Can't you see that, Kostrov? You, an old Party man? Are you so embittered by your personal frustrations?"

"No," said Kostrov enthusiastically. "Comrade Fedossenko, I beg you to . . . Why that's the very reason I made my submission to the Central Committee in 1928 . . . I . . ."

Fedossenko let him get up, wander around the room with the floating steps of a drunk. How dirty he was! Wisps of straw in his hair, grey bristles thickening his neck . . . Fedossenko went over to him as he stood in the corner of the room, between the safe and the door to the secretariat, and backed him amiably against the wall.

"You don't know all of it yet, Kostrov . . . This is the time that those hare-brains on the far Left, those people without the least consciousness who, in spite of themselves are doing everything they can to unleash the backward, discontented masses against the power of the Soviets, have chosen to conspire . . . Your comrades here, all these Ryzhiks, these Elkins . . .

"Reports on the deportees in Kansk, in Minusinsk, in Turgai, in Krassnokokshiask, combined with the reports from the directors of the Federal penitentiaries, have put the finger on a vast underground organization, spread out across the whole USSR, connected with centres abroad . . .

"They're sincere, they have the revolutionary flame, we know it as well as you do, Kostrov. But does that make them any less dangerous? And now I'm asking you: which side are you on? With them or with us? If you're with us, you must help me right away. The Chernoe case is not very important, but I have to get to the bottom of it. What are the theses they discuss? You must know from . . ."

"Why the Verkhne-Uralsk theses, of course, and the ones from the *Bulletin* on the liquidation of under-mechanized *Kolkhozes*, on the adventuristic and exploitative mentality directing industrialization on the *Alianza Obrera* in Spain . . ."

They kept to the terrain of ideas, but already the very mention of Verkhne-Uralsk pointed an accusing finger at Varvara, established a connection with the Left's Federation in the isolator. The mention of the *Bulletin* traced that connection back to Prinkipo, Berlin, Paris; the *Alianza Obrera*, what was that? Italian or Spanish: something concerning the Communist International in any case . . . Fedossenko would have rubbed his hands together, if it hadn't been necessary to play his cards close to his chest. His report would make a magnificent impression . . .

"Don't mention any names, if you prefer not to, Kostrov. I respect your scruples. Talk to me about the ideas with precision. I note . . ."

Rodion's name appeared, nonetheless, after two hours, in M. I. Kostrov's detailed statement on the illegal activities of the Chernoe Trotskyist Centre. Kostrov, exhausted by his mental effort, was holding his head in both hands. He still hoped he hadn't said anything in any way compromising, for these ideas were known, but he was wincing with physical self-disgust. Maybe it was only hunger.

Fedossenko rang. He, too, felt broken. When the Runt entered, he ordered, very quietly:

"Have them give him a bath. Soup from the ward-room. A clean cell."

The Runt, standing at attention, replied:

"Right, Comrade Chief. I have a report to make, Comrade Chief about the demand of prisoner Rodion, who presented himself voluntarily this morning. He wants to make a confession, Comrade Chief."

"What?"

"Precisely, Comrade Chief, just as I said."

Kostrov left. In his hand, an incredible little rectangle of thin cardboard: a card postmarked Moscow in Ganna's handwriting . . . Yet no fever lighted up within him. Wearily, as if he had been emptied of himself, he headed for the passage to the cellars. The Runt pushed past him, amiably. "No, this way, citizen, allow me . . ." This way, any way, what difference did it make? To sleep. To end.

Fedossenko had them open Rodion's cell for him. The ceiling was low, his height filled it. The little lad sitting in the straw got up slowly, brushing off his knees with his fingertips. There was mischief or gaiety in his tiny

green eyes. He made no greeting. Not demoralized, that was certain. Then what? Fedossenko examined the black stone, the ventilator, the straw bedding, and Rodion, from bottom to top, from his worn out boots to his mason's or carter's jacket, to his turned-up nose, his unhandsome, peasant's face—a little peasant's face like so many others, a race of serfs: tramps, migrant workers, soldiers, all alike in their grey uniforms, cousins to the teeming coolies whose swarm fills all of Asia . . .

"How art thou, young fellow?" asked Fedossenko at last, awkwardly, for he still didn't understand.

"How art *thou*, Citizen Chief?" answered Rodion with a little smile.

The advantage was his from the start. His use of the familiar "thou" made Fedossenko's neck turn purple.

"You have a statement to make?"

That's right. Hands in his pockets, Rodion answered that he would make it in writing. In substance, he was assuming full responsibility . . .

"For what?" inquired Fedossenko.

"For everything. I'm the one who did everything. Alone . . . I confess!"

"What, everything?"

"The theses, that was me. I'm the one who received the information. I was the liaison with . . . I won't say with whom. There wasn't any group, there was me, the organizer. I won't tell any more . . ."

"But my boy, thou art mad," Fedossenko, helpless, nearly exclaimed. Anger came to life in his muscles. Kostrov's deposition, the fruit of so much effort, didn't explicitly accuse anyone but Rodion, and Rodion was confessing. There was nothing left but a ridiculous Rodion affair. They were making a laughing stock of him. In the twinkling of an eye, by lying to his face, this young fellow had emptied the whole beautiful dossier . . .

"Why art thou lying, thou little son of a bitch?" scolded Fedossenko.

He towered over him by a whole head, and all the grey light from the ventilator was focused on his stubborn jowls. He was going to advance on Rodion, shove him hard against the black stone wall, grab him by his skinny neck like the bad boy he was and teach him to obey, the louse! But he didn't move and Rodion didn't back off. "I forbid you to speak to me in the familiar form," Rodion said firmly.

"Ah! Thou liest! Ah! Thou confessest! Ah! Thou forbiddest me to . . . !"

These three interjections collided furiously inside Fedossenko's skull. The only thing he articulated was an "Ugh!" and his clenched fist struck Rodion square in the face . . . They both reeled, one carried away by his momentum, the other under the impact and the pain of his lips crushed against his teeth. The black stone walls, the ventilator, the low ceiling pitched around them; then they both regained their balance, face to face: pale (the young lad with the piercing glance), red and breathing heavily (the Chief of the Special Service) . . .

"Get this brute out of here," Rodion said quietly to someone, probably to the Runt, who must have been standing there, behind Fedossenko, at the entrance to the corridor, to the Runt who had seen . . .

"Ah! Thou insultest me."

The huge Fedossenko hurled himself at Rodion, bent him back, knocked him down, felt a hank of hair, a neck in his grasp, a flank, then a belly under his knees . . . He bore down on that unresisting body with his full weight, he hammered it blindly with both fists . . .

"Comrade Chief, with your permission . . ." The voice of the Runt brought him back to himself, brought him back to his feet, brought up the chilling reminder of his uniform. He was covered with straw up to his shoulders, there was plaster on his knees (where did the plaster come from? that was odd), blood and scratches on his knuckles. Shredded pages of the dossier were swirling around him. Rodion seemed unconscious to him. The Runt closed the door . . .

Rodion had not lost his most acute lucidity for a single instant. He was accomplishing something more than a duty: a necessity. Clear the comrades of the charges. Throw the investigation off the track. Defy the powers of evil. Give himself. He felt there was enough unsuspected strength in him to fight with anyone. He could have felled the colossus, Fedossenko. Knocked down, bruised, blows raining down on his body, he never moaned, thinking confusedly: Strike, brute! There's nothing more you can do! That was the idea onto which he clamped his bloody teeth. Further off, in the depths of a gaping silence, there reigned a feeling of power: I can do anything, even die here, victoriously, under your boots. When the door was bolted, Rodion bit

his sleeve. A stifled howl emerged from his chest—not a groan, an inarticulate cry like the cry of wolves on snowy, hungry nights when all the earth's sorrow howls through their strength.

* * *

Every year, just before Spring sowing-time, the government tries to ingratiate itself with the peasants. This year, in March, a circular from the Centre had required the authorities to permit (which meant to instigate) the re-opening of a few churches, "without, however, appearing to encourage a revival of religious activity." Two months later *The Godless*, the official publication of the Atheists' Society, edited by an old member of the Central Committee, denounced these symptoms of a religious renaissance. Questioned by the Central Control Commission, the relevant department in the Commissariat of the Interior certified that the percentage of re-opened churches remained 3% lower than the percentage allowed. The director of that department was immediately transferred: the higher-ups would have preferred the allowed percentage to be surpassed. The General Secretary had hinted as much. "Eh, let the peasants pray a little more or a little less; we don't give a damn as long as they sow!" Thus *The Godless* did not get the Central Committee's permission to raise the issue in a broader context. One of the secretaries of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda gave them a suggestion: "Direct your attack against the sects instead: Security hasn't looked into that corner for a long time . . ."

Right after that, a series of articles appeared in a little illustrated magazine with a poorly-printed cover coloured a dismal greyish-green. On it the Pope, snickering under his tiara, was handing a bomb with a smoking fuse to a Polish general. The articles on page three dealt with *The Revival of Counter-Revolutionary Sects*. Knapp skimmed them with one dim eye while getting his hair cut. But three weeks later, *Pravda* approvingly reprinted seven lines from the second of these articles. Knapp always read the central organ of the Party from cover to cover, especially what was between the lines. "Ah, so!" He rang and ordered his secretary to get a detailed report on religious sects in the district ready by the next day. "Right, Chief!" While

waiting, Knapp had to deal with some Zionist deportees whom he had been ordered by telegram to arrest and transfer to the Regional Centre under escort. Were there two or three of them? No doubt about two. The third, a Communist loyal to the general line, a lecturer in a Pedagogical Institute, expelled, imprisoned, then deported in the wake of an affair of embezzlement of public funds, did not associate with the first two. A disciplined, orthodox Communist, the dossier on this Isaaksohn indicated that he was the author of several articles on Zionism published by an organ of the Party. As an extra added precaution, Knapp had him arrested: they would see at the Regional Centre whether or not he should be released. Knapp transmitted his doubt in veiled terms to the Region. The two authentic Zionists, a Jewish student from Kiev and an old ruined shopkeeper from Berdichev, were housed in a cellar of the Security building, where they greeted Isaaksohn with snickers. Previously, when they had run into him in the streets of Chernoe, they had ostentatiously turned their heads away. In prison, they looked him square in the face: wispy goatee, wrinkled pockets under his eyes, sickly complexion. It was he who turned his head away.

"It did you a lot of good, eh?" the student told him, "betraying the Jewish nation and writing so much trash about us?" The pedagogue overcame a sudden desire to sigh and answered sententiously:

"Young man, one day I hope you will understand that the salvation of the Jewish proletariat is in the socialist revolution and that Zionism is a corrupt bourgeois ideology, *ja, ja, eine korrumpierte kapitalistische Ideologie* . . . And now please don't speak to me any more . . ."

The two Zionists turned scornfully away from him and began a long discussion between themselves on the origins, causes, forms, moral and social consequences of the betrayal of certain rotten elements of the Jewish nation, ah! completely rotten "like the dead hand of a leper, like a collapsed nose in a syphilitic sore . . ." They carried on this horrible conversation during every waking moment, for forty hours. Isaaksohn listened to them without saying a word, with a dismal, wizened face which he believed was impassive but which was soft like the face of a rag doll. After a day and a half, the door opened and the Christians entered.

A superficial investigation revealed to Knapp the presence in Chernoe of Believers belonging to several dangerous sects, mostly composed of former deportees, some of whom had been sent to Black-Waters under the old regime and others under the new. Knapp had the twenty-three most suspect among them arrested in order to sound out their political attitudes. This group included two Castrati (*Skoptzi*), old shoe-makers. At the house of one of the two they seized a little wooden casket containing a dried-up penis, scissors, and a knife wrapped up in old, yellowed linen. There was a very old woman who had known Father Illiodor and already passed for a saint in a concentration camp. She sold wicker baskets, which she wove with her own hands, on the market-place, and people venerated her. There were artisans, men and women of the Flagellant Sect (*Khlisty*), who had been run out of the Baikal region three years earlier, having arrived there after being run out of the Ural six years before. Finally, there were Baptists, the most numerous group and the most suspicious since they had corresponded with America, received dollars, and conceived the idea of building a City of the Sun in Siberia. They looked like ordinary workers but they neither drank nor swore, which was quite extraordinary. They even arrested a Silent One, a robust forty-year-old fisherman with a combed beard and a peaceful smile, who never spoke except in his dreams so that even the members of his entourage finally came to believe that he was a mute in his wakeful state. Yet he understood everything and preserved a mischievous gravity in the depths of his eyes. Thus he appeared in Knapp's office, bowing with dignity, his hands crossed over his chest, nodding to signify that he knew how to read and write, yes, but wished neither to read nor to write . . . "They are people of the Middle Ages," Knapp said to Fedossenko, for they considered themselves men of the scientific age.

Overworked, waxen-faced, Knapp slept five hours a night: he had so many cases to keep up with. At night his deputies went around arresting people. The salt fish case caused the arrest of the five managers and twenty workers of the commercial Fish Syndicate. Thirty casks of salt fish delivered to the Regional Centre were going bad as a result of insufficient salting: the Syndicate claimed, on the basis of documentary evidence, that it had requested salt, even grey salt, from the Statified Salt Trust in vain. Half of

the quantity delivered, which was 40% less than needed, had apparently been stolen by the workers and then sold to the small fishermen's cooperatives, whose salt fish was still edible. Besides, where did the salt given over to speculation in the market-place come from? The two employees of the Salt Trust should have been arrested too, but, smelling trouble, they had departed, leaving a sign scribbled in red ink on the boards of their shop: *There is no salt*. There was nothing to investigate at the three small fishermen's cooperatives. However, they were in debt to the State Bank and the tax collector and hadn't been meeting their payments for months. Yet the authorities hesitated to foreclose on them, for this would have ruined the fishing industry merely in order to auction off a few old nets which the Fish Syndicate would have bought up at a ridiculously low price . . . Knapp had the administrators of the co-ops arrested on account of the loss to the state caused by their poor financial management. This was purely a pretext, for the only case he intended to pursue was the salt affair, which was interesting because it could be linked up with the sabotage of distribution in general . . .

Two other cases, which came to light at the same time, left him with a further burden. In the nave of Saint Nicholas' church, where the wind blowing through the broken dome had carried in so much dust that grass was beginning to grow on the flagstones, two packing-crates of dry-goods, left for storage, had been broken into. The job had been organized by the transport workers with the complicity of the stock-watchers' service: nineteen arrests . . . That same day the smoked-fish factory named after Kaganovich collapsed. An audit of the books prescribed by the Party Control Commission revealed that the enterprise was insolvent: the State Bank would lose eighteen thousand roubles at first estimate, and a subsidy amounting to twice that sum became necessary to keep the factory working . . . All this made a shambles of the year's financial plan for the district, and the Party secretary was wild with fury. Here is how the factory had executed the plan of the regional committee: by allocating the funds budgeted for re-tooling and amortization in order to cover current production costs, by overestimating the contents of crates produced by 20%, by . . . Get it? On top of this, the workers were systematically stealing one fifth to one sixth of

total production. Thirty-five arrests. And matters were threatening to get even worse: now the factory lacked both funds and hands, while the fisheries continued to deliver raw materials. The fish were spoiling. The fisheries were demanding to be paid for them. The procurator telephoned to the Party Committee, the Party Committee to Knapp, Knapp to the Regional Centre, Regional Security to the Regional Planning Commission, Planning to Control, Control to the District Party Committee . . .

The manager of the State Bank should also have been locked up. He couldn't have been unaware of the illegal use actually being made of the funds he was granting; and, when consulted on the bonus of 3000 roubles to be awarded to the factory manager for having carried out the annual plan ahead of schedule, he had given a favourable opinion. But the chief of the economic department of State Security didn't want to take the initiative for this arrest, and Knapp hesitated to order it. If all the administrators in the district were suddenly sent to prison, couldn't someone ask him if he had been asleep up to then? When the bank manager learned that his crony, the factory manager, had been arrested, he wrote out a crushing denunciation against him referring to another denunciation, written much earlier, in a veiled style so as to pass unnoticed. That clever devil took precautions. Knapp congratulated him.

Trotskyists, Zionists, Believers, fishermen, workers from the factory, administrators and company managers—in three days it added up to over a hundred extra prisoners to accommodate . . . A hundred women brought food-parcels to the gate of the Security building. They waited patiently from nine in the morning to seven in the evening standing in a long line against the wall in the square. The whole town was talking about them, but no one was surprised. Yes, they're arresting people; they're arresting them every night. Ah! And it's not over yet, it's like last year at this time, remember? The sabotage case, the food supply, distribution, and fishing cases! Ah! they locked up plenty of people; they were grabbing them every night! "Chernoe?" said Knapp. "A real combat assignment . . ."

The man who deserved the most sympathy in all of this, from the administrative viewpoint, was the commandant of the Security prison. His accommodations, cellars and cells, suitable for fifty prisoners, already held

two hundred and twenty-seven two days before. Where could he house the hundred new prisoners? Where? And there were segregation orders: under no circumstances could certain prisoners be put in with certain others. The commandant was beside himself.

"Put 'em wherever you want to," shouted Knapp, who was swamped by the factory-bank dossier, "but, remember: you're responsible for whatever happens. Cope." The commandant had a brainstorm: the old stable, which had been turned into a garage, was empty except for two old machines which were never used. Fifty men could sleep as well there as anywhere else, on the ground, while waiting to be transferred to the prison. The stable was a sort of shed constructed of old planks, which stood isolated in the middle of the Security grounds and was surrounded with barbed wire to prevent the drivers from getting in to steal petrol . . . Naturally only quiet prisoners would be kept there, the kind who don't escape or get into fights: politicos, administrators, Believers—well-behaved folk.

When Rodion entered this new prison, he found it full of people. Workers who were strangely clean and calm were sitting on the ground around the two old autos: they were Christians—Baptists, Flagellants, Castrati . . . Rodion had no need to push as he made his way through them, not even a little, for they politely moved aside to give him room. He went and lay down under one of the Fords along the planked wall. As neighbours, he had a young Jew on his left and on his right a bearded, forty-year-old fisherman whose clothes did not stink of either pickling-brine or fish-guts. The young Jew introduced himself "Zionist deportee. And you, comrade?" The bearded fisherman, questioned in turn, did not answer, but his whole face lighted up with a smile and he slowly nodded his head. We're all men, aren't we? At least that's how Rodion, who didn't press the point, understood him. "What is Zion?" he asked dreamily. "The light on the mountain," the young Jew said gravely, "the hope, the salvation, the resurrection of the people of Israel: our socialism, which we have been waiting for since the Diaspora . . ."

They were still conversing as night fell. Little by little the murmurs faded in the garage. A motor rumbled close by behind the wooden wallboards, which seemed extremely thin to Rodion after the stone walls of the cellar.

Raising his head a bit, he glued his eye to the place where two boards met and clearly saw the night, the edge of a roof, a patch of marvellously dark, clear sky . . . He lay down again with his arms behind his neck, overcome by emotion. The vast night was so close! The chill of the earth penetrated his shoulders. He stretched his arm out along the wall and his fingertips felt the friable soil at the bottom of the planks. Damp earth, ash: his fingers dug into it of their own motion. As he lay on his side, his hand became like a sly animal eagerly digging the earth right next to the head of the red-bearded fisherman, who was now asleep, murmuring through his half-parted lips: for the Silent One only escaped from silence through sleep. Rodion watched him and Rodion dug. Now, without effort, his hand emerged on the other side, opened out. The free, starry night cooled his palm . . .

From that moment on Rodion stopped thinking, as if he had shut the eyes with which he watched himself. Yet his whole being was now charged with lucidity as if he had opened new eyes of flesh, long closed, with which to see reality . . . His hand bathed in the dazzling air. Then it deftly seized the edge of the board, which gave way under its pressure. Rodion loosened it slowly, irresistibly, noiselessly. The old rusty nails were pulling out of their holes: he could sense this. His movements were sure. Flat on his belly, chin on the ground, using his head as a battering-ram, he put his weight against the planks in the darkness. They creaked, but some of the sleepers were groaning. One of them got up and went to piss noisily into the tank. Rodion pushed harder so that the noise of the second creak would be covered by this gurgling fountain. The board came loose. He held on to it with both hands. The night poured in, cool on his face. He looked around him. The rear end of a Ford half hid him. The young Jew was sleeping; no, he was feigning sleep. He had heard, he had understood. His closed eyelids were flickering, his breathing was strained. Rodion could sense the sweat on the man's nose and forehead. "Farewell, comrade," said Rodion within himself, "the paths of Zion pass through prisons without number, like those of the proletariat . . ."

On his other side, Rodion encountered the wide-awake eyes of the Silent One. "Close your eyes! Sleep!" whispered Rodion with an authority born of desperation. *No*, replied the Silent One with an almost imperceptible flicker

of his eyelids. Rodion felt fear. The Silent One, who was lying on his back, turned his whole body toward Rodion. He stretched out his hand, took hold of the loosened board, pushed it aside, and signalled with his head: *Go*. "Come," murmured Rodion. This time he shook his beard ever so slightly. *No. Why should I flee? Flee what? But you, since the cool night calls you, go. Follow your heart's desire, may God help you!* This thought was only silence, but it cut through the silence. Rodion crawled into the opening left by the board. The Silent One held the board up with one hand; with the other he pushed Rodion's back. The earth—totally black. The night air in his nostrils. In his ears, in his chest, the regular beating of his heart. A sharp pain in his belly—oww—the touch of barbed wire. The hand of the Silent One, moving by divination, slid under him, freed him, protected him . . .

Once outside, Rodion at first got up on his knees. The neighbouring buildings were shapes of sheer blackness standing out against a sky all streaming with crystals. Total silence. Rodion ran, leaped a wall, slipped like an intelligent shadow under a watchtower on which a sentinel stood guard, and suddenly filled his lungs with unbelievable freshness . . . The bend of the Black-Waters glistened at his feet between the line of the rocks and the line of the woods, at the beginning of everything.

* * *

Galia was the first to get up, at the break of dawn, in order to split wood, draw water at the river, light the stove, hang out the laundry washed the night before, clean the fish, cook the bread, make ready for the day . . . She went out, hair bound in her red kerchief, thin and palefaced in her loose smock, a hatchet in her hand. The last stars were fading in the sky. Blue shadows were vanishing across the earth. The colour of the young woman's red kerchief stood out unique in a universe flooded with brightness. She wore that colour but she did not see it. It was the hour of the day's first solitude; her throat felt tight, her arms cold. You have to go on living. Split wood, carry water, even with that stab in the heart, that slight nausea, those puffy eyelids because she had awakened in the middle of the night to think about Dimitri and to cry for herself as she thought about Dimitri. She

selected a birch log, planted it deftly on the ground, raised the hatchet . . . At the edge of the yard, in the bushes, someone moved. And Galia actually *saw* Dimitri wave to her. Then her mouth tightened. It was only Rodion. "Galia, I escaped! I don't know how it happened. Elkin will certainly be sent to Moscow. Don't hope for anything: with them you should never hope. Take courage. I'm hungry. Find me something to eat. I'll be walking for three or four days through the woods and across the steppe until I get to the White-Waters. I'll take the longest way round since they'll be after me. Quick, Galia, I haven't a minute and I'm hungry, hungry."

There was a joyful vibration in his voice.

He waited in the bushes while Galia went down into the cellar. From one minute to the next things were growing clearer and clearer inside him, as they were on the earth. Galia returned with her hands full of riches: bread, onions, dried fish, a green apple, matches, a knife, ten roubles—all she had. "Here's my brother's passport. Leave quickly, before it's completely light. Try to ford the river with the woodcutters . . ." She filled his pockets, happy to touch him. He felt overwhelmed by a happiness he did not yet deserve and which he would pay for later.

"Galia, I'll . . ."

"What will you do, Rodion?"

Taut, erect, she stared at him avidly: mouth open, dark; eyes wide, tinged with silver.

"I promise you, Galia . . ."

"What are you promising, Rodion?"

"I promise you and the others, I promise you all . . ."

He couldn't say what, overcome by something definitive, at last attaining certainties which neither his thoughts nor his words could express.

"Farewell, Galia. Thank you."

"Rodion, Rodion, what joy, what sadness . . ."

Suddenly she took his head in her hands, which were soft and supple, pulled him to her, hugged him, and he felt her kissing his hair, felt Galia's dark lips seeking his face . . . He heard them murmuring: "Farewell, Rodion, farewell, farewell, farewell, farewell . . . Be strong, Rodion, hold on

to yourself with strong hands . . . Don't be afraid. Follow your road, Rodion. God be with you. Go my Dimitri, Dimitri, Dimitri, go . . ."

When Rodion was gone, Galia picked up the hatchet which had fallen at her feet. It made her feel good to grasp it firmly and heft it at the end of her arm. She walked back to the house with determined steps. The tears continued to drip, one by one, down her ashen face. Her eyes gazed implacably at the log whose white bark was shimmering under the dew and she split it with the first blow.

* * *

Comrade Knapp, the District Chief, had summoned his collaborators—Department Heads and Deputies—to his office at two in the afternoon as on great occasions . . .

Present were seven uniforms, four pairs of spectacles, seven service revolvers; there were two thin men, one fat man, one bemedalled man, one bald man, and the Runt. The fat one was Fedossenko, taciturn for the moment, the most important of the lot, but tortured by an aching anxiety: on the previous day the Chief had asked him for the dossier of the big case under investigation. Missing were the head of the Criminal Brigade, who was off on an expedition in the neighbouring woods looking for Rodion, and his assistant, who had wandered even farther afield in pursuit of some bandits. The latter was only to return on a stretcher, his head severed from his body. At the first stroke of two, Knapp strode rapidly in and waved his hand around the room—please keep your seats, comrades—but he did not shake hands. They noted his ashen face, his pinched nostrils, his eyes, which were evasive rather than distant. A chill entered with him. He took his seat behind his desk. The secretary, a young officer with a Charlie Chaplin moustache—perpetually jolly, today anonymous—handed him a printed sheet and a scratch pad. Knapp, head down, gave a slight cough. His shoulders were square, his neck thin, erect, and wrinkled, his chest flat. A shrivelled old life, perhaps ascetic, perhaps diseased, in any case tired of itself, slowly drying up. His silence was so weighty that the head of the Economic Department, who was smoking, comfortably ensconced in a

leather armchair, put out his freshly lighted cigarette on the floor. The new Deputy in charge of prisons (his predecessor had been in jail since the day before yesterday, when Rodion had escaped) choking with fear, grabbed at the collar of his tunic like a hanged man. Knapp, applying to his subordinates the procedure he had successfully used in the past on prisoners under interrogation, prolonged the glacial silence. He was barely breathing. Finally, raising his head, his glasses as grey as his face:

"Comrade Department Heads and Deputies . . . (*Pause*). I have called you together today for a matter of extreme importance which involves the honour of the Security Department and our responsibility before the Party . . ."

This solemn exordium took everyone's breath away. The Runt's shoulders trembled from sheer nervous agitation. The director of inner-departmental services made a super-human effort not to turn pale. He preferred to cough. My God! If someone had discovered a leak in supplies, if . . . The same thought rolled from head to head around the room: "Which of these bastards has informed on me for . . .?" Knapp did not condescend to follow his effect on their faces. No one was smoking anymore. Knapp said:

"Comrade Fedossenko."

Normally, the person thus addressed would murmur "Comrade Chief . . ." in reply without moving and would remain seated. But this time his name was pronounced with such icy authority that Fedossenko slowly got up, in spite of himself. He straightened his belt and the hem of his tunic with thick, squared-off hands. None of this augured any good. The Chief's tone of voice was not suggestive of congratulations; yet the dossier . . .

"Comrade Fedossenko. I spent the night studying the case of the counter-revolutionary Trotskyist centre of Chernoe. Your manner of conducting the investigation was beneath criticism . . . Hum . . . beneath all criticism . . .

Fedossenko, choking, took one step forward and stood at attention. Everyone's eyes were glued on him. Six pairs of lungs exhaled the same silent *ouf*! Take it on the chin, my fat friend! Ah! How you used to put on airs! The big-shot! In charge of a big political case! Well, dear colleague, well, pig-face, you can climb down off your high horse now. You've had it.

And Fedossenko, through a secret sense of hearing, took it all in. Everything was crumbling around him, everything, everything . . . Awful. And Knapp went on:

"What about these cases of a seven-pound loaf of bread and twelve hundred school notebooks? The directive from Moscow states clearly: 'In certain cases it will be permissible to prosecute them for common crimes, without, however, allowing this to appear systematic . . .' You were preoccupied with a seven-pound loaf stolen by delivery men, while a secret Committee of Five was carrying on its activities—its pernicious activities—among the deportees under your supervision. Where do the twelve hundred notebooks come from? From Moscow. Did you warn the Central Collegium about the presence of active and organized counter-revolutionary Right opportunists in the distribution service of the Public Education Department right in Moscow? I'm asking you did you report this?"

"No," stammered Fedossenko.

Murmurs of disapproval surrounded him on all sides. Who would have thought? Such criminal negligence! Oh!

"Among the prisoners in your custody, the most dangerous Trotskyist, by his own confession, escaped. ESCAPED! Comrade Department Heads and Deputies, we are all responsible for this inconceivable event . . ."

Knapp's letter-opener rapped sharply on the edge of the desk. They were all aware of the event, but their collective stupefaction weighed all the more heavily on the guilty party to the extent that each felt relieved on his own account.

". . . Myself first of all for having allowed a dossier of this importance to remain in hands that are incapable . . . (*long pause, grey eyeglasses flashing from face to face, hushed voice*) or suspect . . ."

If Fedossenko did not fall over backwards, it was because he had the backbone of a bull, which kept him erect, independent of his will. His last shred of self-respect fell with his last hope. He raised his hands in a gesture of supplication and said in a humbly reproachful voice: *Comrade Chief, how could you . . .*! then, pulling himself together, cried vehemently: *Suspect? Me? Never*! But all this took place inside him, Outwardly he remained stunned,

totally immobile and utterly mute, while his face grew more and more flushed and a nasty fog drew over his eyes.

"In itself, the case of the Trotskyist Centre is unexpectedly serious, but your investigation, instead of shedding light on it, strangely obscures it. From now on I will conduct it myself. Fedossenko!"

(. . . just 'Fedossenko?' That's it . . . It's . . . it's . . . it's prison . . . pri . . .)

". . . I had ordered you to stay within legal bounds, do you recall?"

Fortunately, whenever a superior addressed a question to him, whatever his personal inner turmoil, Fedossenko immediately recovered the power of verbal assent:

"*Yes, Comrade Chief.*"

"Yet the escaped perpetrator, before escaping, turned in a complaint against you for brutality. Do you admit your guilt?"

"I . . . No . . . I don't know . . ."

"One of your subordinates corroborates the escaped man's complaint. Don't be in a hurry to deny or confess it. You'll have time to think about what line of conduct to adopt in front of the investigating judges of the Party and Security. You have betrayed the Party's confidence and sabotaged the work of Security. You will be under arrest until further orders."

The Director of inner-departmental services, a cigarette dangling from his lips, had the outrageous effrontery to murmur "Very good!" Fedossenko said, "I obey, Comrade Chief," turned on his heels, took three stiff paces, opened the door, went out, did not collapse, but continued to walk, his head buzzing, straight down the hall . . . Then the Runt burst into sight in front of him, limping, one shoulder higher than the other, with holes in place of eyes.

"This way, Comrade Chief, if you please . . . Your revolver, please, Comrade Chief, if you please . . ." The Runt was hopping around him, looking as Fedossenko had never seen him, with a head that was more of a death's head than a living head, an outsized uniform hanging over a hollow chest, the flat voice of a puppet or a ghost . . . Puppet or ghost, he carefully shut the door of a white-washed cell on the demolished Fedossenko.

* * *

Rodion crossed over the Black-Waters with the first group of loggers on their way to the cutting-grounds in the woods. They removed their boots before entering the water, where they followed a trail among the rocks which was known only to them. One clumsy fellow fell into the stream and splashed about in the suddenly-seething water for a moment before regaining his balance. People laughed. "Easy to get drowned here," someone said to Rodion. "There are holes—no way to know all of them—and then the rocks, they move around . . ." Rodion had to pretend that he, too, knew his way among the treacherous rocks, which were hard to see because of the reflections. He followed the footsteps of the men ahead of him. Once in the shelter of the woods, the loggers stepped up the pace in order to get warm: Rodion would have liked to run. All at once the excitement of escape electrified him from head to foot. He wanted to leap with joy, to burst out laughing, to dance, but he made an effort not to turn around too often so as not to attract attention. He mingled with the little groups stretched out along the path through the underbrush, which was slippery with pine-needles. Around nine in the morning, they would be starting after him with dogs. What would they give the dogs to put them on the scent, since he had left nothing behind him? His straw mattress at the Kurochkin's? So many sweaty bodies had slept on it . . . "My poverty protects me," he thought with satisfaction. He had deliberately taken the longest, most dangerous, most improbable route . . .

Danger loomed simply at a turn in the path, much earlier than he had expected it, and Rodion approached it with steady steps . . . The silhouettes of the pines stood out more sharply before his eyes, the silence of the forest became softly, terribly resonant . . . Under a dark, ancient, pyramidal pine, a grey-coated horseman was inspecting the loggers' papers. Attentively he fingered the passports or working papers of the "special colonists" (they were deportees, too); he barely glanced at the men. He was a puffy-faced young soldier with dirty hands who appeared to be half-awake. His little shaggy roan was licking the moss on the ground. Rodion got out the passport Galia had given him, which he had not had time to look over. He hadn't yet learned his new name. Then, head held high, in order to hide the look in his eyes without appearing to conceal them, he stared calmly at the

soldier, looking not into his eyes but just below, at his nostrils, his thick, chapped lips. "If you take me away, little brother, I'll strangle you . . ." This clear resolve sank into Rodion like a stone dropping under water: everything remained calm on the surface. Attached to his passport was a little white card with the photo of a clean-shaven young man in his Sunday best wearing a blouse with an embroidered collar. Rodion had a ten-days' growth of beard, a swollen right eye, scurfy scales on his chin . . . The soldier handed him back his papers. "Next." The next man, an old fellow with broken-down shoulders, long hair, a face lined with deep wrinkles and furrowed all over with long, faded whiskers, did not have his papers in order. He was missing some visas on his deportee's certificate. He explained in a whining voice, while showing his ribs, that he was suffering from a disease, that he wasn't able, that Comrade Petrov knew it, that Comrade Petrov . . .

"I spit on all that," said the soldier: "I don't need your explanations. Orders are orders, old brother. You gotta come with me . . ." They went off among the dark pines, the broken old man, head lowered, silently preceding the sullen horseman. The horse also lowered its head, in order to browse the moss along the ground, and the rider, sitting listlessly with his hands hanging slack, let himself be carried along. The forest, around them, was desolate.

For Rodion, the underbrush was bathed in warm green light. Rodion replaced the old deportee in a crew of woodcutters. "We're lucky," said the crew chief. "We'll make our quota by nightfall." They made it. Toward noon, when the sun speckled the pointed tops of the pines with diamonds, the men, stripped to the waist, were struggling along bitterly amid the pools of light which lay on the red-brown earth. Axes thudded furiously against the tree-trunks, opening wounds whose delicate coloration no one noticed. The fresh resin lay beaded there like fat tears. Its odour mingled with the odour of sweat. A saw rhythmically cried out its two monotonous notes like the wail of some unknown beast. Toward the end of the afternoon, the loggers ate bread and dried fish on which crystals of salt were shining. When there was nothing left of the sun but an incandescent ball hanging over the lacy edge of the tree tops, work suddenly stopped. Too exhausted

to curse, the men now had the sunken glossy eyes of sick people and heavy, charred hands with veins bulging out like bizarrely knotted ropes under their skin. With some difficulty, Rodion stood up erect. He was tormented by splinters and his shoulders and legs were bruised by the branches of a pine whose fall had nearly crushed him.

"Well!" he said joyfully, 'we're alive!"

No one echoed him. He remembered that he alone was escaping, that the others would return tomorrow and on every succeeding day, perhaps every day of their lives, to this forest humming with silence in order to fulfill this impossible quota. They would go on indefinitely, from their hovels to the old condemned trees, from sleep to work, obsessed by the idea of the quota and by hunger, for the quota is bread and bread demands the quota and neither bread nor the quota have any end . . . Rodion left them in the purple evening shadows. No one thought of him as he lingered behind, the last, on the homeward path. *Slaves! slaves! comrades!* . . . Rodion bade them fare-well inside himself with a sigh of deliverance. He found his way by the stars, his limbs exhausted, his head ardent, his steps stumbling and deliberate like those of a drunken man. The pines surrounded him with their tall, motionless silhouettes. Suddenly outcroppings of rock burst through the soil; he slipped, fell, got up again and went on, panting, through the darkness, which was now blue, now spangled, for it was raining stars. In reality—if there was a reality realer than his half-delirious flight—thirst and fever were the cause of the silver disks which danced before his pupils, dilated in the night. Thirst and hunger now prevented him from thinking, but he walked on, walked on, lacerating his feet against roots and rocks, into the depth of the night, the madness of thirst, the exaltation of escape, the proximity of death . . .

It was probably the next day or the day after. All at once the stars froze, the sharp outline of the trees burst open across the sky, and Rodion fell over backwards. A single thought crossed his mind, creeping across his brain like a tiny blue flame on the ground: "I'm drowning . . ." Was this the fourth or the fifth day of his new life? How did he drag himself, appeasing his hunger by chewing pine leaves and green moss, which had the taste of damp stone and under which tiny, salty worms still wriggled between his teeth—how

did he drag himself out of the woods, into the full pale light, toward the stream whose murmuring he could hear distinctly, the stream he could glimpse from a hundred yards away, flowing among the roots, the stream which didn't exist? How?

Then, suddenly, the landscape opened out in two great folds: the woolly flocks of pine trees huddled back into a huge past; an immobile avalanche of rocks and scrabble toppled down toward the wide milky ribbon of a river on the far shore of which lay a golden sandy beach. And Rodion's excessive joy was overpowered by a fear: "I'm done for, it's a mirage . . ." Despairing, he made his way down toward the mirage. He spent his very last strength in economical movements so as to avoid falling (perhaps he would never have got up again), to find handholds, footholds, to get closer to the mirage. His whole mind, awakening from silence, fever, thirst, delirium, even from the will to live which engenders delirium and mirage, was concentrated on that miraculous water, spread like a sheet of sky, drawing nearer and nearer. It wasn't a mirage, since it was drawing nearer, since he could make out tufts of grass right on its bank, but why shouldn't there be tufts of grass on the bank of a mirage? He began to believe in the reality of that water only when he had quenched his thirst in it.

One more day slipped past outside measurable time between the vanquished mirage, the reality of the water, and the icy sadness of evening. Rodion was getting some of his strength back. The sun licked the wounds on his bare feet. He no longer felt his hunger. He had to swim across those three hundred metres of real water, tomorrow, when the sun reached its zenith. The night was polar, illuminated by an enormous moon. Bats fluttered nearby. Rodion felt himself come suddenly awake, but he had merely emerged from an extremely lifelike dream, only to drift back into chilled somnolence. The teeth-chattering morning was longer than the night; then the sun climbed into the pure solitude of the sky. When the earth and the river were all aglow with it, Rodion took off his clothes, made a bundle of them which he hung behind his neck, carefully observed the sandy bank on the opposite side, and slowly entered the water, which was so cold that all his flesh bristled. Another step and he fell in—the rock ended there. The cold penetrated him through and through, but he swam

calmly across that white, gilded, liquid ice whose current deflected his course slightly. Every ten seconds, he raised his head toward the sun, mouth open, eyes dazzled, to snatch the warm air. So careful was he to conserve his strength that he refused to turn around in order to see how far he had come. And the farther he swam, the wider grew that sparkling sheet. A million needles tore his skin. He swam with frenzy, his guts convulsing with strange cramps. But the warm golden sand which at last shimmered before his eyes was only a mirage . . . His muscles clenched violently, his mouth, open in order to drink in air, breathed in water, water. A dull thunder rumbled in his ears, then exploded like a peal of bells. In his frenzied effort to overcome the pain and asphyxiation he turned himself around and the last thing he saw on earth was the high wall of the bluff crowned by pine trees . . . The vast forest climbed inexorably higher, filling the sky, swinging out over the land to come crashing down on the lost swimmer. With extraordinary detachment, the drowned man saw the river close over his head—clear, without a ripple, abstract.

* * *

A man was squatting in front of a fire of twigs cooking some sizzling, red meat hanging from a sort of tripod. As his eyes opened, Rodion saw that man from behind. On his head he wore a fur cap made of a bristly animal-skin. Rodion's first thought was mingled with saliva, for the grilled meat was giving off its pungent smell in the sunlight. Rodion recognized the golden sand on which he was lying—naked, exhausted, in a vast warmth. The man, as if sensing that glance on the back of his neck, spun around on his bare heels. Rodion saw a low forehead over which hung curly hair the colour of dirty straw, a wide mouth, a fleshy nose marked by a scar, and crafty, little pointed eyes as blue as the sky.

"So you're back?"

Rodion recognized the sing-song accent of the Black-Lands folk in the man's speech.

"Thank you," he said simply, and he added, after a pause, "comrade."

"You can take your comrades and shove 'em up your arse. What kind of comrade are you to me, you poor half-drowned fool? What makes you think I'm not going to turn you in to earn the bounty? You think it's not obvious you escaped from the camp? Which brigade were you in? The Yagoda Brigade? The Enthusiasts' Brigade? Triumphant Socialism? Screw the lot of them, citizen. If you don't want me to chuck your arse back in the water, you better not call me comrade. In this country, you'll learn there's no more anything: neither socialism, nor capitalism, bunch of syphilitic whores. There's only you and me, and if that makes one too many, the question will be easy to settle without consulting the masses . . ."

As he delivered this half-mocking, half-angry monologue, the man was carefully broiling the meat. Rodion, comforted by his deep bass voice, tried his limbs: they were working, almost painful. A sudden confidence in the universe made him cordial.

"I'm sorry. Thank you anyway. That smells good."

"That smells of broiled wolf-cub," explained the man. "I killed it this morning in its lair. It bit me on the thumb, the little rascal. I didn't think it was so quick. There are lots of them here. I'm a wolf to the wolves, I am. I catch their scent, I lie in wait for them, I know all their tricks, and they haven't learned mine yet. You see, I'm the more cunning in this class struggle . . . So I eat them. (*His eyes were laughing.*) I spot the lair. When the she-wolf goes off to hunt, I sneak up. Gotta work fast. I whistle, I imitate the little growling sounds the she-wolf makes, like this, listen . . . I don't know whether it makes them nervous or charms them. The wolf-cub comes up; he shows the end of his snout, all pink and grey, then a suspicious puppy eye. I whistle again to give them confidence. I let him see my left hand, that intrigues him. He's never seen a human hand, he can't suspect that it is made to kill in a thousand ways. They're innocent, wolf-cubs, they're fools, and my hand looks like a harmless animal, it's pink. So he licks his chops and he jumps at it; to play, I think, for he's not yet strong enough to be mean; but I've got another hand, I have, and I break the wolf-cub's neck with this . . ."

This: a piece of flint similar in every respect to the weapons of prehistoric cave-men.

"That's my productive system. I don't need any cooperatives, I don't."

With his fingers the man took a pinch of coarse salt and sprinkled it over a slice of meat which he practically threw in Rodion's face. "There, eat." Rodion was so weak that he attacked that sand-covered meat with his teeth, right on the sand, without even trying to take it in his hands, so as to move as little as possible . . . Time passed, perhaps a long time. The wolf-cub's flesh had a delicious taste of blood, a taste of sunlight, a taste of life.

"How did you pull me out of the water?" asked Rodion at last.

Sitting with his legs tucked under him, Samoyed-fashion, the man went on devouring broiled meat, which he held with both hands. Bones cracked under his teeth. His hair was hanging over his forehead and eyes. His eyes sparkled with good humour: less, though, than his teeth. He replied only after a long while, after he had spat onto the sand some chewed tendons and some little crunched bones whose marrow he had sucked.

"First ask why," he said cheerfully. "Maybe I was more interested in your bundle than your pretty face. If you had had a good pair of boots I'm not sure I wouldn't have thrown you back into the water. What is your life going to be good for? I don't need it, and the entire world doesn't give a damn, believe me, just like I don't give a damn. I really don't know why I didn't just let you sink and drift slowly down to the White Sea. Maybe that would have been better for you, one more drowned man never hurt anybody. And nobody will ever ask him for his passport. Maybe I needed your company, arsehole. Not for long."

Rodion was listening in a dream. Such utter translucence reigned on the green fringe of the bushes. He asked:

"What's your name?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Ivan."

"Ivan Nobody?"

"Exactly." Ivan got up, sated, smiling a funny smile of well-being. He walked around for a while between sand and sky. He filled the vast landscape: his low forehead, his rounded shoulders, his heavy jaw, his vigilant little eyes, their blue cheerfulness sharpened by slyness. Stockily built, broad and heavy, giving an impression of enormous strength now that he was standing up, dressed more or less like a hunter from the Taiga. He

returned toward Rodion, who lay naked, limbs outstretched, shivering. From his full height he looked down at Rodion and suddenly declaimed in a joking schoolboy's voice:

Diadia! diadia! our nets
Have pulled in the body of a drowned man. . . .

"That's from Pushkin," said Rodion, at the edge of unconsciousness.

"And Shakespeare?" said Ivan, with an imperceptible trace of mockery, "do you know that name?"

"No . . . I've only read Hegel, Hegel . . ."

"Possible. But you have fever, my drowned man."

How much warmth there was in his voice now . . . Rodion, feeling faint, closed his eyes. The man kneeled down next to him and with both hands began covering the lad's naked body with sand. Rodion felt that material warmth over all his flesh. His features relaxed. His childish face emerged from the sand. The light, passing through his eyelids and his sleep, extinguished all thought within him. He was coming back to life.

. . . He spent several days with the man, Ivan, who said he did not know the name of the river nor that of the other river whose junction Rodion had to find, a two or three day's walk upstream. There, big rafts loaded with logs were always floating downstream; by riding on one for three days you get to a town, a town without a name or memories either, for this man was wary of men, of language, of numbers, of memories. "Rivers have no names in nature," he said mischievously. "Drowned men don't have names at the bottom of the water, and they all have the same blue faces. The wolves don't know that they are wolves. That's the way things are . . ." He led Rodion to his lair, a comfortable burrow, large and quite dry, which had been dug right into the earth of the steppe. It was well exposed to the sun, yet well hidden by the bushes, and it was so well laid out that Rodion thought several men must have worked on it. Two cavalry coats and two heavy winter quilts made a comfortable bed. As he fell asleep there for the first time, Rodion felt a fear: why shouldn't Ivan smash my head in tonight? And he immediately answered himself: a refugee from a firing-squad and a

refugee from a drowning—we were made to sleep together underground. What good would my death be to him? What good is my life to me? Nothing has any importance. No more problems. The simplicity of things made him slightly dizzy. The earth was vast, vast . . .

They parted without shaking hands or pronouncing any useless phrases. Both were taciturn, probably because the sky was white and heavy that day. Nothing to say to each other on the edge of the beach where a gloomy heath began. Rodion set off toward the dark line of distant mountains. Ivan was holding a stump of a carbine with a sawed-off barrel and a sawed-off stock, which dangled at the end of his arm. When Rodion was about a hundred metres away, Ivan raised up that mutilated weapon and shook it up and down over his head for a long while. He seemed to be sending incomprehensible signals. Rodion, who was walking rapidly, turned around several times to answer him by waving his cap.

* * *

The other nameless river was wider. A stunning breadth of heavenly blue flowed between sheer cragged cliffs of purplish-blue rocks. Tree trunks were floating in it. A wisp of smoke curled up over a patch of woods. From that point on, Rodion's whole being was expectant, on the lookout. Hidden on the bank, which was covered with tall reeds pointed like swords, he watched the majestic passage of a huge, well-constructed raft carrying a complete building made of logs. The men aboard were talking very loudly in a language he didn't understand, Finnish, or Samoyed or Syzran or Mari. They were blond men, rather well dressed in sweaters and old rusty leather—probably Communists. The next raft appeared several hours later, just before sunset, through a cloud of gnats. It was small, less heavily laden. Two young lads were steering it, standing, with long poles. Rodion hailed them; they came in to shore with a sort of indifference, welcomed him aboard without saying a word, and handed him a pole. All this took place automatically. As soon as the sun had set, the rocks took on the colour of blackened blood; the river became hostile, the gnat-bites painful. Then the two lads broke into an old convicts' song:

We go on. dragging our chains
Down the road of sorrows
We go on. dragging our hearts
To the end of our bitter fate
One night we will escape
Beautiful girl, you will love us
And then they will pinch us again
Beautiful girl, you will cry for us

They kept repeating this stanza—the only one they knew—until they could no longer go on: from fatigue, from dull sadness. Rodion sang along with them as he worked his pole, for they needed to pay strict attention in order to prevent the current from dashing them against the rocks. At critical moments the three lads, leaning out over the dark waters, would arch their backs, absorbing the impact against their chests with a single gasp, and one of them swore. When the moon rose they again took up the song of chains and sorrows, of love and heartbreak, until the hour when, exhausted, they moored in a sort of creek in order to sleep. At dawn, Rodion told the two lads he had money, and they sold him a hunk of black bread for three roubles. As a precaution he left them a few hours upstream from the town. He leaped adroitly onto the bank. The two lads, having turned their backs, never saw him again. The surface of the water was shimmering, totally calm, and the motionless shrubs were reflected in it, emerald green.

"An escaped man," said one, "God go with him."

"An escaped man," echoed the other in reply, "The Devil take him."

The town began with a row of poor log houses standing in little yards enclosed by dilapidated fences. A little girl bounded out, barefoot. Her feet were black. Rodion halted, enchanted. He felt naïve joy, tinged with another feeling—bitter, almost terrible—as he gazed at those familiar houses, always the same, with thatched or planked roofs so weather-beaten that you could see daylight through them. What town was this? He didn't dare ask. He mingled with the crowd, searching for a street-sign, a notice posted by the local Soviet. But this was a town without street-signs, without posters, perhaps without a name, an ordinary little town with ruined churches: the same empty cooperatives as everywhere, a line of people in

front of the closed shop of the *Tabak-Trust*, a miserable market-place where everything—the horses' long drooping heads, the people's faces, the rare sacks of grain—had the same colour of dried mud . . . On the red gauze banner strung across the main street, Rodion, who did not wish to read them, made out two faded rain-washed words: *Enthusiasm, Industrialization* . . .

His hungry wanderings led him to a vast building-site bristling with scaffolds and tall skeletal walls of red brick. Trucks were jouncing drunkenly through mud-puddles without even startling the little, resigned horses harnessed to ancient carts. Casks of cement were bursting through a rail fence, and men were bustling clumsily about among the trucks, the horses, the carts, the cement, the scaffoldings. On a door Rodion read: *Now hiring: labourers, masons, carpenters, stucco-workers and others—bed and soup*. He pushed open the door. Inside it smelled of cheap tobacco, fresh lime, manure, benzine; it was full of hoarse voices arguing about an incident involving a missing cart-load, a drunken driver, twenty-seven roubles, the Control Commission. Rodion asked for a job as a mason-tender.

"Fine. If you know the work, we'll give you a chance to prove it in the second brigade, 'Socialist Emulation'. Its output is nineteen percent higher than the average for the plan. Three roubles and sixty-five kopecks a day and soup from the technicians' canteen—you're lucky. Only you better meet the quota. We carry out the plan here, brother: we don't want any loafers. If you don't work out, tomorrow I'll send you over to the fourth, the gold-brickers brigade: black-list, two roubles forty-five, and sour-cabbage soup—Diarrhoea Brand."

"I'll meet the quota," said Rodion with an imperceptible touch of self-mockery. "I'm class-conscious, citizen. What are we building here?"

"District Headquarters for State Security, comrade proletarian. So the work must be done properly, you understand. There's competition with the prisoners' brigades."

The crew that Rodion joined included a woman who taught him to carry the maximum load of solidly-stacked bricks on his back and shoulders, to carry them to the top of the scaffolding fast enough so that the masons of the fifth prisoners' brigade never paused for an instant in their methodical

labours. There was no time to breathe, to exchange a few words, or to smoke, and anyway smoking was forbidden, and anyway you lost your taste for everything. To keep up your spirits, you chewed bad tobacco—twenty cigarettes for sixty-five kopecks. The woman must have been about thirty. She hid in order to drink. When she saw Rodion's face drenched with sweat, pinched like the face of a dying man, she joined him on a shaky platform from which you could see a soft landscape of humble roofs and light-green prairies blending off into the horizons. The woman held her brandy-bottle out to Rodion.

"Drink fast! If the brigade-leader catches us we're sure to get fined. . . ."

Rodion, racked with fatigue, avidly absorbed that liquid fire. His legs never stopped shaking under him, but he felt savagely strong and lucid: he saw reality with the intensity of a dream. The woman was flat-chested and the hard, deep-lined features of her face expressed wear and resistance. Her eyes were sunken and surrounded by dark shadows.

"Feeling better?" she asked. The corners of the grey kerchief knotted under her chin were fluttering in the breeze. Her tall form stood out over the scaffolding, and behind her there was nothing but airy space, plains, and Russian earth, the tortured earth of the Revolution, its black waters, its clouded waters, its clear waters, its frozen waters, its deadly waters, its invigorating waters, its enchanted forests, its mud, its impoverished villages, its countless living prisoners, its countless executed ones in graves, its construction sites, its masses, its solitudes and all the seeds germinating in its womb. Rodion saw it all, ineffably. All—even the germinating seeds, since they too are real. And that the woman drinking brandy from the bottle at that instant was truly, totally, a human being. He was entranced to see it so clearly.

"Listen," he said softly, "do you know what we are? Have you ever thought about it?" She considered him with astonishment. And her direct iron-blue gaze was tinged with fear.

1936–38

ВСЯ ВЛА
КОЛОКОЛ
НАРОДНАЯ ВОЛЯ
ЗЕМЛЯ И ВОЛЯ
МАТУШКУ КОНСТИТУЦИЮ
ЧИНОВНИКИ
ХЛЕБА

GLOSSARY

Dedication: Serge dedicated *Midnight in the Century* to his comrades in Spain—dissident Communists like the novel's heroes and, like them, victims of Stalinist persecution. By the time the book appeared, in 1939, the Spanish Republic had succumbed to Franco's fascist legions, having been undermined by Stalin's machinations.

Readers familiar with George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* will recognize the name of ANDRES NIN, founder of the Spanish Communist Party and later leader of the POUM (Independent Marxist Party), who was kidnapped and murdered by Stalin's agents in 1937 in Spain. The Austrian socialist, KURT LANDAU, and the Czech, ERWIN WOLF (a former Trotsky secretary), were revolutionary internationalists who had come to Spain to fight fascism and suffered a similar fate.

JOAQUIN MAURIN founded the Communist Party in Barcelona in 1921. He broke with the Comintern in 1931 to create the Workers' and Peasants' Block, which merged with Nin's Communist Left in 1934 to become the POUM. Elected to Parliament in 1936, he was the first to warn that if the fascists in the military were not neutralized they would overthrow the Republic. He was taken prisoner behind the fascist lines at the outbreak of the Civil War and remained a prisoner of Franco until after World War II.

ANDRADE and GORKIN were younger POUM leaders who were arrested by the Republican government on the basis of trumped-up charges fabricated by the GPU on the model of the Moscow Trials ("Trotsky-fascist" *etc*.) They were saved, in part thanks to Serge's campaigns of solidarity in Paris, and it was Gorkin who in turn saved Serge in 1941 by securing him a refuge in Mexico. KATIA LANDAU was similarly arrested and led a hunger-strike in the

Barcelona prison. She and Russian-born OLGA NIN were the widows of the two murdered militants previously mentioned.↩

Directory: Name given to the reactionary bourgeois government that ruled France from 1795 to 1799 and paved the way for the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte. Stalin is referred to as an "Asiatic Bonaparte" later in the novel. ↩

Thermidorians: Name given to the plotters (among them Barras, Tallien and Bourdon) who engineered the overthrow of Robespierre on July 27, 1794 (the 9th of the month of "Thermidor" in the Year II of the French revolutionary calendar). Thermidor marked the end of the democratic phase of the French Revolution, which had been based on the power of the masses, and marked the triumph of the authoritarian bourgeois reaction. In Russian Marxist circles, "Thermidor" was a synonym for the counter-revolution from within, and Left Communists like Serge's Kostrov often used it to characterize the Stalinist dictatorship. Kostrov's remark about "Left" or "bad" Thermidorians is probably an allusion to those revolutionaries who allied themselves with Stalin (e.g. Zinoviev and Kamenev) only to be devoured by him later on. ↩

'26–'27 Opposition: (Also known as the "United Opposition" because Stalin's former allies, Zinoviev and Kamenev, joined forces with the 1923 Trotskyist Left Opposition during this period.) The organized faction within the Russian Communist Party which, under the leadership of Trotsky, opposed Stalin's policies after 1926. Its members were expelled from the Party in 1927, and many were arrested and deported. Some, like Kostrov here, capitulated to Stalin and abjured their oppositional views in order to survive or to serve the Revolution or both. Trusted neither by the ruling Stalinists (who doubted their sincerity) nor the persecuted Trotskyists (on whom they were obliged to inform in order to prove their loyalty to the Party), the "capitulators", as they were known, lived in a political no-man's land until they were liquidated in the mid-1930s. ↩

Solovietsky Islands: Island group in White Sea, with monasteries; used as place of exile for rebellious priests in Middle Ages; forced labour camp after 1917 Revolution. ↩

State Political Administration (GPU); Also: **Cheka, NKVD, State Security** (including **Special Committee, Collegium, Control Commission,** *etc*.) All these terms refer to the Russian political police, which changed its name several times in the course of its history and was organized into various branches. Since the political police plays an important role in Serge's novel, a brief history of this institution may be useful.

Soon after the October 1917 Revolution, an Extraordinary Commission to combat Counter-revolution and Sabotage (known by its Russian acronym, CHEKA) was created under the nominal control of the Council of People's Commissars with emergency powers to arrest, try, and execute suspects in secret with minimal judicial control. During the long and bloody Civil War, the CHEKA became the principal instrument of the Red Terror in the defence of the Revolution against the White Terror, which was backed by the Western democracies.

Serge considered the creation of the CHEKA to be the single worst blunder committed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. He objected to the CHEKA's procedure of condemning suspects on the sole basis of written reports without allowing them to confront their accusers or to cross-examine witnesses, and he felt that public revolutionary tribunals would have been just as effective and far less dangerous to political freedom. Serge nonetheless respected the heroism, sincerity, and revolutionary probity of many of the militants who served in the CHEKA during the heroic years of the Civil War. Two of the heroes of *Midnight in the Century* are former Chekists (a younger Ryzhik appears as a member of the Petrograd Cheka in *Conquered City*, Serge's 1929 novel about the Civil War) and the contrast between these grizzled veterans and their persecutors—the careerist henchmen of the Stalinist repression—is an ironic theme in *Midnight in the Century*.

In 1922, at the end of the Civil War, the CHEKA was reorganized as the State Political Administration (*Gosudarstevennoe Politichesko Upravlenie* or GPU—later OGPU) under the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD. (The later MVD, MGB, and KGB are the results of further reorganization.) The NKVD was again reorganized (ostensibly in recognition of the "victory of socialist construction") in 1934, the year in which the action of *Midnight in the Century* takes place. It was subdivided into various departments, including State Security, the Militia, Civic Registration, Collective Labour Camps and Settlements (the GULAG in its Russian acronym), an Administrative Department, and Special Committees empowered to take action against "dangerous individuals". Serge's novel is probably the first fictional portrayal of life in the land of GULAG and many of these administrative terms are scattered across its pages.

It should be noted that, although local GPU officials were in many ways a law unto themselves, they were nonetheless (in 1934 at least) subject to review by a Collegium and by the Central Control Commission of the Party, and formal proof of guilt (usually in the form of a confession) was required in most cases. Serge, who was interrogated at the GPU's Moscow headquarters (the Lubianka prison) for eighty days in 1933, was convinced that it was his firm refusal to "confess" in the face of fabricated evidence that ultimately saved him. Had there been any admission or formal proof of guilt in his file, he would never have been allowed to leave Russia in 1936. Within the novel, Serge depicts a local Security chief, Fedossenko, who is caught between the need to demonstrate his zeal by unmasking a Trotskyist "conspiracy", and the contradictory need to produce a solid "case".

It should also be noted that if the early Bolsheviks at times abused the powers of the CHEKA to neutralize or eliminate rival political parties (Mensheviks, anarchists, Social-revolutionaries), Serge believed that it was Stalin's original contribution to turn the GPU-NKVD into an instrument of personal power, using it both to purge recalcitrant factions *within* the ruling Communist Party (including rivals within his own following) as well as to enforce his unpopular policies on the country at large, which he turned into a vast concentration camp. This system of rule by terror reached its apotheosis in the great blood purges of 1936–1939 during which Stalin

liquidated thousands of prominent Communists, including most of Lenin's original 1917 Central Committee. Having used the secret police to liquidate his rivals in the Party and to terrorize the country, Stalin then proceeded to liquidate his chief accomplice, GPU head Yagoda, during the second Moscow Trial.

The action of *Midnight in the Century* takes place during a brief period of relative relaxation on the eve of the great purges. Serge recreated the atmosphere of the Moscow Trials in a later novel, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*.↩

Trotskyists: Members of the Left Opposition. The basic platform of the Trotskyist Left Opposition in the 1923–1927 fight against Stalinism can be summarized in three points: democratization, internationalism, and industrialization.

Democratization: The fight against the privileges of the bureaucracy and the power of appointed officials of the apparatus. Return to the norms of inner-Party democracy of the Lenin era (freedom of opinion, *etc.*). End police-state methods directed at fellow-Communists. (In 1936, at the urging of Victor Serge, Trotsky revised his programme to include a declaration of freedom for all political parties accepting the Soviet system.)

Internationalism: Whereas Stalin and the Right of the Party stood for the gradual construction of "socialism in a single country" (Russia) and promoted opportunistic alliances with bourgeois powers in order to gain "time to breathe", the Left saw world revolution both as a practical necessity (Russia was too backward and isolated to build socialism alone) and as the ultimate goal of the Communist movement—a goal which could only be achieved through solidarity with revolutionary workers' movements abroad. Stalin caricatured the Left's policy as "adventuristic", but the foolishness of his own "realism" became disastrously obvious during the 1927 Chinese Revolution, in which Stalin allied Russia with Chiang Kaishek. When the workers of Shanghai rose and took over the city, Stalin directed the Chinese CP to disavow the insurrection and order the workers to lay down their arms and submit to the leadership of Chiang Kaishek. The resulting massacre of tens of thousands of Chinese workers (vividly described in

Malraux's *Man's Fate*) set the Chinese revolution back twenty years and left Russia even more isolated.

Industrialization: Whereas Stalin and the Right (Bukharin, Rykov) tried to maintain social peace by conciliating the peasantry and encouraging landowners to enrich themselves, the Left feared the power of the new rural bourgeoisie and foresaw that unless the cities could produce industrial goods in exchange for grain, the wealthy peasants (*kulaks*) would restrict production and leave the city workers to starve. For the Left, gradual industrialization, financed by taxing the richer peasantry, would promote exchange and close the gap between city and country. Moreover, the Left saw mechanization and modernization of agriculture as an incentive to woo the peasants away from their primitive private holdings and into efficient collective farms. During the 1923–1927 faction fight, Stalin and the Right castigated Trotsky and the Left as "super-industrializers" and "enemies of the peasant". When, however, the crisis long predicted by the Left broke out in 1928, Stalin did an about-face, broke with the Right, and began "applying" the programme of the Left with a vengeance. (It was at this point that many Leftists "capitulated"). The result was a forced collectivization campaign in which millions of peasants starved or were shot and a forced industrialization campaign (the Five Year Plan) which effectively reduced the Russian worker to the status of an industrial slave. The bureaucratic haste and police-state methods with which Stalin implemented collectivization and industrialization led to forced labour and a decline of Russian living standards to pre-revolutionary levels.

Generally speaking, the Left Opposition saw itself as the political representative of the proletariat and Stalin as the defender of the power and privilege of the ruling bureaucracy. Bukharin and the Right were characterized as representing the interests of the rich peasants and small businessmen who flourished under the regime of limited private property known as the NEP (1921-1928). Nonetheless, many Trotskyists continued for years to view the Communist Party, however corrupt, as the sole party of the working class in Russia. They consequently saw their mission as reforming it rather than overthrowing it.↩

Permanent revolution: Trotsky's original 1906 theory of the class nature of the Russian revolution. Adopted in practice by Lenin in 1917. Attacked by Stalin after 1923. ↩

Ivan Nikitich Smirnov: see note for page 48. ↩

Trubkin-Pipeface: Stalin; his pipe-smoking was famous. (Cf. *Trubka*, Russian for pipe.) ↩

Bulletin of the Opposition: Edited by Trotsky, published in Berlin. Naturally illegal in the USSR. ↩

Barras, Tallien, Bourdon: Thermidorians. (See note above.) ↩

Babeuf: The most extreme representative of the egalitarian spirit of the French Revolution was Gracchus Babeuf, the first to attack the principle of private property and elaborate a communist theory. He inspired the movement known as the "Conspiracy of Equals". Guillotined in 1797. ↩

Beaten in 1923: The defeat of the Left-Communist "Manifesto of the Forty-Six" (calling for industrialization and a return to workers' democracy in Russia), Trotsky's removal as Commissar for Defence, and the failure of the Communist uprising in Germany (October 1923) were major setbacks for the Left Opposition. ↩

Beaten in 1927: The defeat and expulsion of the Left Opposition at the 15th Congress of the CP-USSR. ↩

Wuhan: An industrial city in central China; a centre of Communist activity. Under Stalin's orders the armed Chinese workers and peasants were directed to end their resistance and submit to Chiang Kaishek, who promptly massacred them. ↩

Treint (Albert): Head of the French Communist Party 1924–25. Responsible for the expulsion of the Trotskyists from the Party. A follower of Zinoviev, Treint was himself expelled in 1927. He flirted with but never joined the international Trotskyist movement. ↩

Ivan Nikitch (Smirnov) and **G. L. Piatakov:** Two prominent Russian Left Oppositionists who "capitulated" to Stalin after Stalin's 1928 "Left" turn in order to participate in industrialization. Like Kostrov, many Oppositionists followed their lead. Smirnov and Piatakov were executed in 1936 and 1937 respectively. ↩

Cheka: Soviet political police during Civil War period. ↩

Enragés, Equals, or proscripts of Prairial: The "*Enragés*" (Angry Men), "Equals" (Followers of Babeuf) and "proscripts of Prairial" (banished leaders of the May 1795 insurrection) expressed the revolutionary aspirations of the Parisian poor in the French Revolution. Like Serge's exiled Oppositionists, they were defeated and outlawed when their revolution entered a reactionary phase. ↩

Karl: Karl Radek, international Communist revolutionary active in Germany, Austria, Poland and Russia. Co-worker of Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. Sides with Left Opposition, 1923–1928. Capitulates to Stalin in 1929 and collaborates closely with him. Condemned at second Moscow Trial (1937) to a long prison term during which he was killed. Known for his ironic jokes and clever puns, of which this passage is an example. ↩

United front in Germany: From 1931 on, Trotsky advocated a common front of German workers' parties (Communist and Social Democratic) by which the united working class might have blocked Hitler's rise to power: Stalin, then in his pseudo-Leftist Third Period, insisted that the Social Democratic leaders (labelled social-fascists) were the main enemies of revolution and ordered the German Communist Party to attack them,

rather than Hitler, whom Stalin underestimated. Rejecting the need for a common front ("We are not afraid of Hitler") the German CP adopted the adventurist slogan, "After Hitler, Us!" with disastrous consequences. ↩

Red Plebiscite: In 1932, the Nazis obtained a plebiscite in Prussia for the purpose of overthrowing Otto Braun's Social Democratic Cabinet. The German CP—on Stalin's personal recommendation—joined forces with the Nazis, calling this the "Red" Plebiscite. ↩

Scheidemann, Noske *et al*: In 1918, after Germany's defeat and the Kaiser's abdication, a Republic was proclaimed and the Social Democrats, led by Scheidemann and Noske, took power. In the name of order, they conspired with the reactionary leaders of German industry and the Prussian officer corps to repress the revolutionary agitation of the workers, whose outstanding leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were in consequence murdered in January 1919. ↩

Neumann, Kolarov, Dimitrov: Officials of the Stalinist IIIrd International. ↩

Yakov Blumkin: Intrepid revolutionary. Sympathizes with Trotsky. Executed in 1930. ↩

Polizeipräsidents: German police-chiefs. ↩

The Old Man: Trotsky. ↩

Leon Davidovich Trotsky: (1879–1940) President of the Petrograd Soviet in the first (1905) Russian revolution, co-leader with Lenin of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, organizer of the victorious Red Army in the Civil War, brilliant writer, orator, administrator and theoretician, Trotsky was a towering figure in the Russian Revolution, second only to Lenin. Manoeuvred out of power by Stalin and his allies (Bukharin, Zinoviev,

Kamenev) at the time of Lenin's fatal stroke (1923–24), besmirched and reviled daily in the Party press, he remained for many Communists the symbol of Bolshevik purity against the increasing corruption of the Party. Trotsky led the Left Opposition in an effort to reverse the Revolution's drift away from its original goals, but he was hampered by his loyalty to Party discipline and out-manoeuvred at every turn by Stalin, who used his power as Party Secretary to monopolize the apparatus, press and propaganda machine and to command majorities by dispersing the opposition and rewarding his own followers with key posts. Trotsky was expelled from the Party and banished to Alma-Ata in 1927, then exiled to Turkey in January, 1929. In exile, Trotsky continued to call upon the workers of the world to defend the Soviet Union as a workers' state, albeit a degenerate one, while denouncing Stalin's bureaucracy as the gravedigger of the Revolution and demanding its overthrow. His heroic effort to build a new world party of revolution (the IVth International) on the basis of this somewhat contradictory platform resulted in an unending series of factional splits, and his inflexibility alienated even such close sympathizers as Victor Serge. Hounded from one precarious exile to another, slandered and reviled by the mass Communist press, Trotsky steadfastly defended the interests of the international working class and exposed Stalin's crimes until he was cut down by a Stalinist assassin in Mexico on the eve of World War II. The writings he produced in exile (*History of the Russian Revolution, My Life, The Revolution Betrayed, The Spanish Revolution, Whither Germany?, etc.*) provide a continuous and brilliant Marxist analysis of the key questions of the first half of the 20th century. See: *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky* co-authored by Victor Serge and Natalia Sedova (Trotsky's widow) and the forthcoming Serge-Trotsky correspondence, edited by Peter Sedgwick. ↩

Prinkipo: Prince's Isle, near Constantinople (Turkey). Trotsky's first place of exile. ↩

Baltic-White Sea Canal (or Belomar): This extraordinary feat of Stalinist engineering was built entirely by prison labour between 1931 and 1933. Working night and day in the bitter cold, prison labourers of both sexes cut

through 500 miles of granite and frozen earth using the most primitive wooden implements (steel, concrete and modern construction equipment were not provided). Hundreds of thousands died of cold, hunger, and overwork, but the GPU completed the project on time. Gorky himself edited a book praising the "reforging of souls" that took place thanks to the enthusiastic leadership of the GPU. The canal, unnecessary in the first place (a railroad already connected Leningrad with the White Sea) was never used since it was built too shallow for ocean vessels.↩

The Secretary General: Stalin. Also "Josif Vissarionovich". ↩

Rykov, Alexis: Lenin's successor as Chairman of the Council of Peoples' Commissars. Now (1934) in disgrace. Expelled from the Party in 1937, condemned and executed in 1938. ↩

Alianza, Obrera: Workers' Alliance. A common front of Spanish workers' parties and trade-unions. At first boycotted by the Communists (during their ultra-Left period), it was later joined by them and turned into a popular front. ↩

Klim: Klimentii Yefimovich Vorochilov (1881–1969). Close associate of Stalin. Commissar of Defence. ↩

Director of Propaganda: According to Peter Sedgwick this probably refers to A. C. Stetsky, a former comrade of Bukharin who went over to Stalin and held the post of Head of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee from 1929 to around 1937 when he disappeared to a death of uncertain date. ↩

High Commissar for State Security: Heinrich Grigoryevich Yagoda, Peoples' Commissar for Internal Affairs, 1934–36. Having been in charge of persecuting the Trotskyists for ten years and having prepared the first

Moscow Trial (1936), Yagoda confessed to being a Trotsky agent and was executed in 1938. ↩

The head of the government: Molotov, close associate of Stalin, long Premier and Foreign Minister (hence "diplomat"). Ousted by Khruschev in 1957.↩

Georgian from Heavy Industry: Grigory Konstantinovich Ordzhonikidze (1886–1935). Stalin's fellow-countryman and collaborator in the repression of Georgian autonomy (1922). Organizer of the first Five-Year Plans. May have sought to limit purges. ↩

Serge's imaginative vision of the Russian prison system as a vast constellation in this passage anticipates Solzhenitsyn's "archipelago" image by thirty years. ↩

State Capitalism: Marxist category used to designate the Communist regime as an exploitative system in which the state plays the role of collective capitalist and the bureaucracy that of a new bourgeoisie. ↩

Fleischman: This character appears in two earlier Serge novels: *Birth of Our Power* and *Conquered City*. ↩

Azev, Evno: Head of the Social-revolutionary Party's terrorist organization and member of its Central Committee from 1903 to 1908. Responsible for the assassination of Tsarist Minister von Plehve and Grand Duke Sergei. Unmasked as an agent of the Okhrana (the Tsarist secret police). Okhrana agents-provocateurs also played prominent roles in the Bolshevik Party (e.g. Malinovsky, Lenin's spokesman in the Duma), and Stalin (the ex-terrorist "Koba") was compared to Azev in a 1932 document authored by Riutin and several other well-known Russian Communists. ↩